# cineACTION

## GLOBAL CINEMA
## Canadian films &TV

# 78

## GLOBAL CINEMA

## CANADIAN FILMS AND TV

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This issue features sections on two broad subject areas of contemporary film and media that should be of interest for our readers.

**Global Cinema** includes an incisive dissection of the spectacular success of *Slumdog Millionaire* and a broader discussion of changes in Indian cinema in light of globalization. The latest James Bond and the most popular and scandalous examples of 'torture porn' are analyzed in relationship to the changing geo-politics of contemporary capitalism and imperialism. The evolving representation of transsexuals is considered in popular American films. We also have introductions to less well-known films: *jianhgshi*—the hopping vampires —from Hong Kong and the films of the Italian experimental avant-garde.

There were so many compelling submissions on many other aspects of Global Cinema Now that we will continue this theme in a forthcoming issue.

**Canadian Films and Television** offers a close examination of the iconic *SCTV* series in light of the complex relationships of Canadian identity and both American and Canadian popular culture. A case study of American-Canadian co-productions for television examines, from a different angle and historical moment, changing dimensions of this long-standing cultural question.

Finally, an interview with filmmaker Guy Maddin explores *My Winnipeg*, the film, the city and the book.

—Scott Forsyth

## CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

ISSUE **79**
### CINEMA AND COLLABORATION
From its origins, the cinema has been a collaborative artform. Cinematic collaborations exist in many variations and in this issue, we invite submissions on collaborations that might have been ongoing, or a one time effort.
Edited by Florence Jacobowitz fjacob@yorku.ca and Richard Lippe rlippe@yorku.ca
Please email any questions or interest to the editor. Submissions in hard copy mailed to the editor
40 Alexander Street, #705, Toronto Ontario, Canada M4Y 1B5 **Deadline: August 15, 2009**

ISSUE **80**
### GLOBAL CINEMA NOW
Contributions welcome on films from any national cinema, including, of course, Canada, on particular national developments, on the state of Global Hollywood, on the ongoing transformations of all the mass media, analysis of particular films or genres that reflect contemporary conflict and crisis. We are open to suggestions.
### GENRE AND CONTEMPORARY CINEMA
Contributions on genre in current cinema in any national context.
Edited by the CineAction collective. Questions to cineaction@cineaction.ca. Submissions in hard copy to
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# Slumdog Comprador

## COMING TO TERMS WITH THE *SLUMDOG* PHENOMENON

AJAY GEHLAWAT

Every time a film made by a Western director about India gains critical acclaim in the West, two related phenomena seem to also occur: the greatest hits of negative stereotypes are brought out and served up in the film (think poverty, squalor and general backwardness), even as the 'usual suspects' emerge to tout its merits. I am referring, of course, to the comprador class of critics, those native-born, self-styled authorities who are summoned to validate the authenticity of the work at hand—and to defend it against the potential critiques of their brethren. With this year's Oscar winner, *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), one witnesses the reemergence of both phenomena. In such instances a third phenomenon also frequently occurs, namely, the referencing of the last instance of such a cinematic 'milestone'—in this case, Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982)—as a marker of how far "we" (as a Western/ global culture) have come.[1] Hamid Dabashi has noted the recurrence of the comprador phenomenon in recent times:

**Given the transnational disposition of the globalised empire, a crucial function of its ideological foregrounding is predicated on the role that expatriate intellectuals can play. [...] In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, comprador native intellectuals were actively recruited to perform a critical function for the militant ideologues of the US Empire. Their task is to feign authority, authenticity, and native knowledge and thus to inform the US public of the atrocities that are taking place throughout the world, in the region of their native birth in particular, by way of justifying the imperial designs of the US as liberating these nations from the evil of their own designs.[2]**

While proponents of *Slumdog* may argue that, at most (i.e., at worst), the film is 'harmless fun' or 'just entertaining' or 'only, after all, a *film*', it is precisely such a veneer of innocuousness that *Slumdog*'s proponents summon to defend it from subsequent criticism. The film's director, Danny Boyle, has also expressed this sentiment, noting in an interview with Fareed Zakaria, that "It's an entertainment, in the end. It's not a documentary."[3] The best-case scenario, as framed by *Slumdog*'s fans, is even more problematic, namely, arguing that the film actually *engages* with serious issues (the slums, poverty, corruption), raising awareness and, in the process, functioning as *more* than 'merely' a work of art. Anand Giridharadas, for instance, claims that *Slumdog* "shows a much more realistic version of life in India than films traditionally have."[4] Even better for proponents (to have the best of both worlds) would be to see *Slumdog* as simultaneously being a fun, entertaining film that addresses serious issues. Dennis Lim notes this tendency to have its cake and eat it, too, calling *Slumdog* "a slippery and self-conscious concoction" that "has it both ways. It makes a show of being anchored in a real-world social context, then asks to be read as a fantasy."[5] This would arguably provide the Western fan with the greatest satisfaction, leaving intact his/her complacency about patronizing such films. Furthermore (to come full circle), having witnessed the 'global' success of the film, Western fans can reaffirm their belief in the West's unique ability to produce such successes.

Another phenomenon linked to this last sentiment can also be traced to the emergence of *Slumdog*, namely, the misconception in the West of what constitutes a 'Bollywood' film, as well as the subsequent reappropriation of this latter moniker (itself appropriating the system which now attempts to 'steal it back'). Thus *Slumdog* is heralded as both "the new Bollywood" and "turn[ing] Bollywood on its head."[6] It is precisely in the summoning of this term—ironically now used as a marker of authenticity—that the compradors come in, for who better to speak on Bollywood than Indians?[7] These compradors can even be relied upon to go one step further and argue that, even as *Slumdog* is just as entertaining as a Bollywood film and, in many ways, resembles one, it goes further than any Bollywood film has, or can, in addressing the 'social ills' of India.[8] Here we begin to see the emergence of the first of several contradictions: on the one hand, it is the style of the Bollywood film that prevents it from such (serious, social) engagement; on the other hand, it is precisely such a style that *Slumdog* emulates in engaging with such issues. It is precisely such a contradiction which makes possible the reemergence of what Dabashi describes in reference to the United States' response to 9/11 (the so-called 'global' war on terror) or, indeed, what the recent Oscar Awards ceremony provided, namely, the image of the benevolent white man surrounded by grateful brown children, being honored for his noble effort.[9]

There seem to be at least three invocations at work in the case of *Slumdog*, then: 1. that of the "slum" (read: 'real India') and, thus (as a byproduct of this), the 'good intentions' of the Western filmmaker—in this case, Danny Boyle; 2. that of Bollywood (read: 'real Indian cinema'); and thus, building upon these two; 3. that of the film's 'authenticity' (read: a film about 'real India' made in a 'real Indian' way). In order to better understand how *Slumdog* circulates within such a Western discourse, it is necessary to first examine the underlying premises of these three invocations, as well as their interrelations, in some detail.

## The Slum

In his Introduction to *The Secret Politics of Our Desires*, entitled, "Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum's Eye View of Politics," Ashis Nandy claims that "the right metaphor for the Indian popular cinema…turns out to be the urban slum."[10] In developing this metaphor, Nandy describes the conditions of the slums in Bombay and Calcutta, circa the late 1990s, noting that "nearly half of metropolitan India today lives in slums," and "if their present rates and patterns of growth continue, both cities will become 80 per cent slum by the year 2010."[11] While Amitabh Bachchan is correct in claiming that slums exist the world over (including within the heart of the so-called "First World"), the sheer magnitude of the numbers involved in the case of India is indeed overwhelming.[12]

The slum in many ways comes to define India in the Western popular imagination. As Mark Magnier notes, there is a long cinematic history chronicling the West's fascination—one might even say, fixation—with this paradigm. Film such as Louis Malle's documentaries for French television, *Phantom India* and *Calcutta* (1969), Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), *City of Joy* (1992), and the documentary, *Born into Brothels* (2004), display the ongoing appeal of images of the slum—the "slum-scape," one might say, paraphrasing Arjun Appadurai—in Western films focusing on India. The fact that native-born directors also engage in this phenomenon is both an acknowledgement of the slumscape's appeal to Western audiences and a testament to the savviness of comprador-*auteurs* such as Nair, who claims that "any approach is fine, as long as their [the audience's] bums are in the chairs."[13] Both *Salaam Bombay!* and *Born into Brothels* were nominated for Academy Awards (for Best Foreign Language Film and Best Documentary, respectively), with *Brothels* winning the prize in 2005. In many ways, then, such films—stemming back to Malle's documentaries and including this year's Oscar winner—provide what Shyamal Sengupta calls "a poverty tour" for Western audiences.[14] Furthermore, in the case of *Slumdog*,

this is a poverty tour-as-music video, providing brief, rapidly-edited bursts of shocking "slum" imagery to the pounding, pulsating beats of A.R. Rahman's techno-fusion soundtrack. In an interview Rahman claimed that, with regard to Slumdog's soundtrack, "[Boyle] said no sentiment. And no cello. He didn't want anything depressing. Some scenes are unbearable, and then the music comes in."[15]

Slumdog, in other words, is not E.M. Forster's poverty tour, in which the filth of the Indian slum "deters all but the invited guest."[16] With Slumdog, there tends to be no monotony in "everything that meets the eye"[17]—instead, in Rahman's words, "one is pushed from a cliff and then [given] wings to fly."[18] Indeed, following Alice Miles's labeling of Slumdog as "poverty porn," one could say the slum in Slumdog is aestheticized and invites the Western viewer to enjoy said aestheticization.[19] David Denby has also noted this approach, arguing that "Boyle has created what looks like a jumpy, hyper-edited commercial for poverty—he uses the squalor and violence touristically, as an aspect of the fabulous."[20] If the slum is what Slumdog finds fascinating, then the latter's slummy style may be what, more often than not, draws the ire of its detractors. Slumming the slum, Slumdog's slumlord supplants this site with a simulation, so that even as India emerges (yet again) on the international scene, it finds itself, like the film's protagonist early on in the narrative, literally mired in (its 'own') shit. Naturally the prime consumers of this "visual salad of glowing rotten fruit" are Western audiences.[21] (Slumdog was not released in India until the day after it was nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards and, as Latha Jishnu notes, it has thus far failed to become a hit there, with the Hindi version of the film almost a flop.[22]) Nandy's claim that "most well-wishers of these [slum-dwelling] classes like to serve as the latter's mouthpieces in the belief that they use the wrong language to interpret their predicament," thus takes on new resonance with the Slumdog phenomenon.[23] The ensuing issue becomes how Boyle's imagined slumscape is credited with appropriating an Indian form.

## Bollywood

As a way of beginning this discussion, it should be noted that, despite Bollywood's global popularity, it has yet to make significant inroads with the majority of the non-Indian population in the United States. More often than not, films such as Monsoon Wedding (2001) and Bride and Prejudice (2004) are thought of as 'Bollywood' productions in the West.[24] The differences between such films and actual Bollywood films, however, are worth noting. To begin with, the typical Bollywood film is nearly three hours in length (as opposed to the two-hour length of films such as Wedding and Bride), and typically features five to six song-and-dance sequences. These sequences, along with playback singing and sound, feature frequent costume and scenery changes as well as intricately choreographed dance movements that combine a range of 'Western' and more classical 'Indian' styles. Meanwhile Slumdog, coming in at two hours, features a grand total of one 'song-and-dance' sequence at the very end (technically during the end credits), in which the male and female leads, accompanied by a host of background dancers, perform a (stationary) line-dance in one setting: the platform of a train station. How and why, then, is Slumdog heralded as "borrow[ing] the narrative and aesthetic elements of Bollywood" or, indeed, as being a "Bollywood film"?[25]

Bollywood, according to comprador critics, is defined by its logical loopholes and "feel-good factor."[26] Critics subsequently find similar structuring—"all [the] classic elements of popular Indian cinema"[27]—in Slumdog. Yet what ultimately informs Slumdog (more than the Bollywood narrative/form) is the game show format. While both formats (Bollywood and the game show as manifested in Slumdog) generally engage in narrative ruptures and departures, the nature of these ruptures (or, of this rupturing) significantly differs in these cases. Whereas, in the typical Bollywood film, the most frequent narrative disruptions—the song-and-dance sequences—bear no direct relation to the story, Slumdog's narrative breaks subserve the game show storyline, in the sense that each of the main character's recollections provides him (and the viewer) with an answer to the question he faces. In this sense, while the Bollywood rupturing (via song-and-dance sequence) works to defamiliarize and disorient both the narrative and the viewer, the 'departures' (read: Jamal's recollections) in Slumdog demystify and reorient both film and viewer, 'explaining', as it were, the present scene through the flashback.[28]

This narrative 'reassurance' is crucial to understanding Slumdog's success with Western audiences. As screenwriter Simon Beaufoy noted, "We felt if we could bring them [the audience] back to the safety of 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire', they would be comforted and go off on another dangerous journey into another culture."[29] While actual Bollywood films are generally criticized by Western critics and audiences for their lack of narrative plausibility, Slumdog's narrative structure is praised as "clever," even by those who otherwise dislike the film. Heera Kulkarni, for instance, director of an Indian arts and culture group in Northern California, argues that "there is more to India than this part of India" (i.e., that Slumdog depicts), however, she acknowledges that the film carries an "exceedingly good story line."[30] One might rearticulate the distinction between Bollywood and Slumdog by saying that the latter's departures ultimately reaffirm the telos of its filmic plot, while the song-and-dance sequences in Bollywood remain essentially outside of the narrative proper and are not necessary to it. It is in this sense that the sole 'song-and-dance sequence' in Slumdog comes, without coincidence, at the end of the film, i.e., after its story has completed. Its position can no longer disrupt the narrative, and it serves instead as a form of narrative coda. In this sense, the static nature of the dance—dancers and camera remaining essentially stationary on the station platform—doubles that of the narrative. There are, in other words, no "absolute loopholes" in Slumdog's narrative logic—rather, the film remains faithful to its game show format, whose Q & A structure keeps both film and viewer on an essentially linear journey.

Finally, there is what film critic Anupama Chopra calls "the feel-good factor" of Slumdog.[31] While this is undoubtedly true (Slumdog indeed contains such a factor, as do many Bollywood films), as noted previously, the Slumdog viewer is led to "feel good," paradoxically, via the aestheticization of the slumscape, presented both as something exotic and familiar/-ized. Jamal's ability to leave this setting behind at the end also contributes to the "feel-good factor" of the film, in that it conveys the essentially transitory nature of such 'slumminess', that is, that it can be escaped (Here we see the resurfacing of the Horatio Alger/ Dickens narrative, repeatedly referenced by critics in their discussions of Slumdog).[32] In Bollywood films dealing with

the slum, on the other hand—for example, those featuring Amitabh Bachchan from the 1970s—the protagonist's 'rise' comes in tandem with the rise of the slum (i.e., its dissolution). In *Trishul* (1978), for instance, Bachchan's character, Vijay, cleans up the slum (singlehandedly) and constructs new housing complexes in its place. If one feels good, then, it is not because Bachchan can leave (or has left) the slum but, rather, because he remains and transforms it from within.[33] This may indeed invest Bollywood films (at least those of the 1970s that *Slumdog* is allegedly almost an "homage" to) with "a vision of a desirable society or a lost utopia."[34] However, this is in direct contrast to the dystopian vision *Slumdog* provides of the slum, as a source of lurid fascination and a place to escape. Before coming to terms with what this fascination/ escapism entails, I would like to briefly examine the third invocation made by (and for) *Slumdog*.

## Authenticity

As noted earlier, one of the interesting ironies of the *Slumdog* phenomenon is how it has made Bollywood a marker of its authenticity. This use of Bollywood becomes particularly intriguing in terms of Sumita Chakravarty's metaphor for this cinema, one of "impersonation."

**Concentrated within this metaphor [impersonation] are the notions of changeability and metamorphosis, tension and contradiction, recognition and alienation, surface and depth: dualities that have long plagued the Indian psyche and constitute the self-questionings of Indian nationhood. Indian cinema, caught in the cross-currents of this national dialogue and contributing to it, has made impersonation its distinctive signature. This is more than a matter of reinforcing truisms that films impersonate life; characters impersonate real men and women; the film-viewing experience impersonates dream. Impersonation subsumes a process of externalization, the play of/on surfaces, the disavowal of fixed identity."[35]**

Bollywood (as its moniker suggests) simultaneously references a multiplicity of identities and repudiates any one, essentialized form other than, paradoxically, one of impersonation. With *Slumdog*, then, we see popular Western cinema impersonating popular Indian cinema which, in turn, impersonates popular Western cinema. How to gauge authenticity in this funhouse of

mirrors? One way is by distinguishing between the forms of impersonation *Slumdog* and Bollywood engage in, as well as how these differing forms, in turn, create different approximations of the so-called "real India."

According to Vamsee Juluri, professor of media studies at the University of San Francisco, *Slumdog* "brings it down to earth."[36] As noted earlier, much has been made of the authenticity of *Slumdog*'s setting, which comprador critics have described as both "real" and more realistic than Bollywood.[37] Indeed, it is precisely by removing "Bollywood's 'filtered lens'" that *Slumdog* becomes more authentic (read: brings it down to earth) in its depiction of India, according to these critics. One might paraphrase this, however, along the lines of Chakravarty's and Lim's earlier characterizations of Bollywood and *Slumdog*, respectively, by saying that *Slumdog* replaces one impersonation of 'India' (that of Bollywood) with another—"a simulation of 'the real India'," as Lim puts it.[38]

Another way in which *Slumdog*'s authenticity is forged is by the invocation of 'real Indians' and their collective response to the film's multiple Academy Awards. Writing in the *Times* the day after Oscar night, Somini Sengupta effectively articulates this particular strategy at the outset of her article: she begins by noting that the film's "depictions of filth" fueled "protests," but then, "on Monday, as India woke up to news of the spectacular wins" by *Slumdog* at the Academy Awards, "this movie-mad country went 'Jai Ho'."[39] In other words, whatever problems Indians may have had with the film have magically melted away with its garnering of Oscars. The movie, Sengupta asserts, "was embraced as India's own," a sentiment also voiced by the film's co-director, Loveleen Tandan, in Sengupta's earlier piece, when she claimed that "for us [Indians], it's almost like a validation of our celebration of cinema…It [*Slumdog*] feels like it's ours."[40] In this way, "India" is made to speak for *Slumdog* via its compradors, even as *Slumdog* is seen as "speaking for" the real India, i.e., the one overlooked by Bollywood. Rather than a reappropriation of *Slumdog* by Indians, this strategy may be described as an appropriation of "India's own" by *Slumdog*.

In the process, members of the Motion Picture Association of America become the ultimate arbiters of authenticity in this 'global' arena. Such a formulation also maintains the First World–Third World hierarchy in which, yet again, the East looks to the West for direction and approbation. Such a relationship was also in evidence the last time an 'Indian' film won at the Oscars. One witnesses the emergence of the third phenomenon described at the outset of this study in newspaper columnist Vir Sanghvi's claim, the day after *Slumdog*'s Oscar wins, that "even when *Gandhi* won the Oscar for best picture all those years ago, we never felt that it was India's victory"; *Slumdog*'s success at the Academy Awards, however, in Sanghvi's view, is a "breakthrough for India."[41] Thus, in comparison to *Gandhi*, *Slumdog*'s Oscar wins are said to mark the true arrival on the world stage of authentic India. It is precisely in line with such a formulation that Anil Kapoor, the Bollywood actor who plays the game show host in the film, can claim, "India has made a clean sweep here"; the office of India's prime minister, Manmohan Singh, can assert, "The winners have done India proud"; and comprador-*auteur* Shekhar Kapur can argue that *Slumdog* is "the most successful Indian film ever."[42]
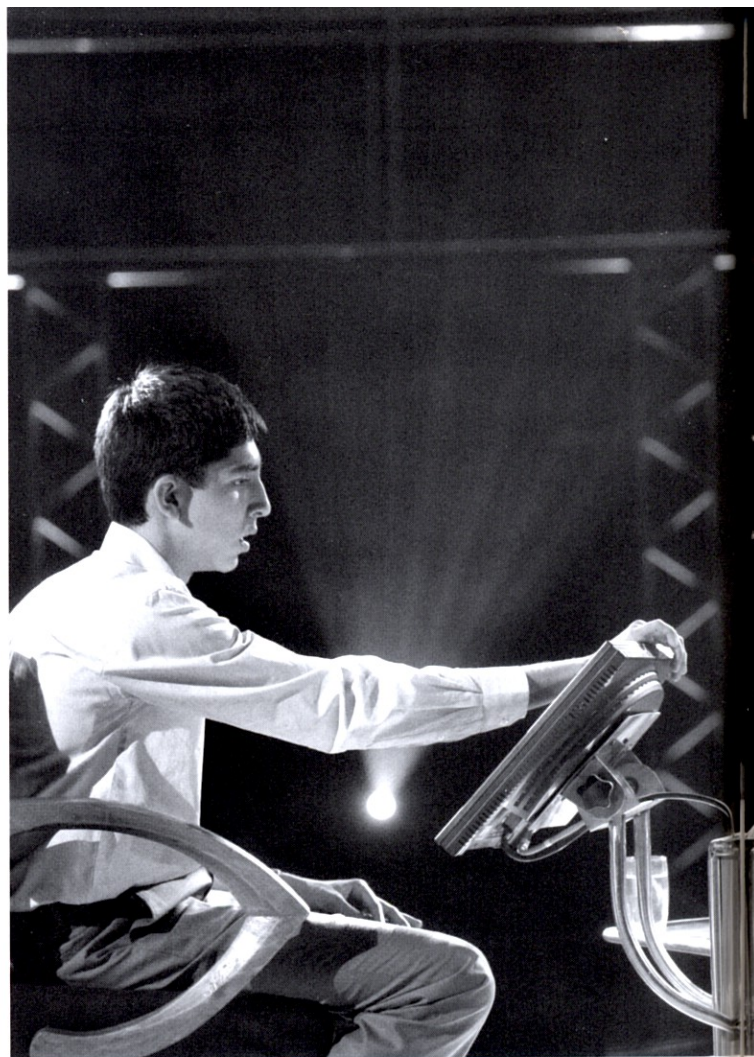


## Whose *Slumdog*?

Having examined the underlying premises of the invocations made on *Slumdog*'s behalf, the question we must now address is: for whom? In other words, who owns *Slumdog* or, to be more precise, whose interests do such invocations serve? Even as spokesmen for Fox Searchlight Pictures, which ended up buying *Slumdog*, told *New York* magazine that "the film is Obama-like" for its "message of hope in the face of difficulty," there is another, earlier political relationship that needs to be examined in greater depth, namely, that of India and the United States during the past eight years of the former administration.[43] In a visit to the White House this past September, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told then-President George Bush, "This may be my last visit to you during your presidency, and let me say, Thank you very much. The people of India deeply love you."[44]

Why so much love? During the ongoing U.S.-led 'global war on terror', or "G.W.O.T," as it is occasionally called, India and the U.S. have developed "a natural partnership," in which Bush elevated India to the status of "strategic ally" and, in 2006, moved to create an exception in global nuclear nonproliferation treaties, by proposing that India be allowed to keep its military stockpile of nuclear weapons and simultaneously be given access to U.S. technology and fuel for its civilian nuclear reactors, setting a clear double standard in terms of nuclear nonproliferation policy.[45] This agreement has led to increased collaboration between the two nations, with companies from either country gaining

increased access to the other's markets. As Giridharadas notes, industries in both countries now have a "vested interest" in "deepening ties"—in Afghanistan, for instance, Indians and Americans are collaborating in nation-building.[46]

Yet, as Giridharadas also notes, India's closer ties to the U.S. have also caused anger amongst much of the poorer Indian population, whose members are denied entry to the U.S. market even as Indian software engineers are given easy access.[47] In the Western view, as Shekhar Deshpande notes, India has two distinct elements: poverty and call centers.[48] Yet there is another lucrative area of collaboration between India and the U.S. that has, until recently, been denied access to American businesses: the cinema industry. India is famous for being one of the few nations in the world to boast of its own thriving film industry (Bollywood) which does not rely on nor allows itself to be usurped by Hollywood. Yet this, too, may be changing. As Deshpande notes, Slumdog may merely be the most successful in a series of burgeoning joint ventures between the U.S. and Indian film industries, following Sony/Columbia Pictures' 2007 release of Saawariya, Walt Disney's 2008 collaboration with Yash Raj Films on the animated release, Roadside Romeo, and Warner Brothers' release of this year's Chandni Chowk to China.[49] Giridharadas has speculated, following political scientist David Singh Grewal's argument that "when empires wane, they live on…by embedding their values, systems and standards in a presumptive heir," that India may indeed become such an heir to waning American hegemony in the twenty-first century.[50] Another way of formulating this, however, would be to say that India may become the United States' comprador, thus extending U.S. power rather than signaling its diminution.

Even as I write these words, Gandhi's glasses have been auctioned off in Manhattan, to the tune of $1.8 million. In many ways, the account in the Times reads like a Slumdog narrative: "After intense protests from India's government and the Indian press, Mohandas K. Gandhi's eyeglasses …were sold…for $1.8 million at an auction in Manhattan, after last-minute attempts to halt the sale."[51] A synecdoche quite unlike the pince-nez of Potemkin, Gandhi's $1.8 million glasses serve as an apt paradigm for viewing Slumdog, and for Slumdog's mode of viewing India. In them, we see how an 'Indian culture' is commoditized and sold (The auction also included a slide show of Gandhi, complete with a recording of piano music). Adding to the controversy of the sale, the glasses' owner, one Mr. Otis of Los Angeles, offered on Wednesday to donate the glasses to India if the Indian government agreed to increase its spending on the poor.[52] Here, then, we also see a form of 'benevolent blackmail' or, perhaps, ransom, in which cultural artifacts become bargaining chips in the ongoing exchange between East and West. In the case of Slumdog, of course, the cultural artifact on display is the slum (and its inhabitants). Yet, just as Gandhi's glasses are no longer the same once $1.8 million has been paid for them, the slums of Slumdog are no longer 'real India' but, indeed, "a white man's imagined India."[53]

All of this is not to deny the existence of the Indian slum but, indeed, to question how it is consumed by Western audiences and how it continues to circulate for such consumption. Salman Ali, a twelve-year-old boy who lives in the Mumbai slum, claims he would love to appear on a game show like Slumdog's protagonist. Yet, however hard he tries, Salman says, he never gets ahead. Whenever a film crew begins to shoot in the slum, he tries to get their attention, however he is never chosen to be in the film.[54] Boyle has claimed that he is "not a politician," however, one would be remiss to not notice how Slumdog has been positioned (by comprador critics) as a form of cultural critique, despite or because of Boyle's best intentions.[55] In this sense, it is also somewhat difficult to believe that the director was truly "astonished" at the film's reception, particularly in America, given that Slumdog has been tailor-made for precisely such an audience.[56] As Ashis Nandy has noted, popular cinema does not merely shape and become shaped by politics, it "constitutes the language for a new form of politics."[57] Slumdog does precisely this by employing "a well-honed psychological technique: creating a lovable or at least tolerable strangeness by projecting predictable elements of a once-known world on to the strange and distant."[58] By aestheticizing the slum, Boyle contains and channels it along "more acceptable paths," namely, those leading to all the awards ceremonies in the West, where it has been hailed, in part, as precisely what its director denies it to be, i.e., a form of political critique.

In the process of articulating such a critique (of India, of its slums and its popular cinema) Boyle paradoxically draws upon—or, lays claim to—the very elements being critiqued to inform his vision. Boyle's central thrust, for instance, "was to capture…as much of the city [Mumbai] as possible," as "you cannot ignore that part of life in Mumbai—nor would I want to."[59] Similarly "crucial" for Boyle is that his film be seen as "a Bollywood film in the sense that virtually all the cast and crew are from Bollywood," yet also, crucially, not as a Bollywood

film, in the sense that, "it is a good story."[60] Boyle's language here is telling, in particular his metonymic substitution of "Bollywood" for India. Despite Boyle's claims, however, his lead actor, Dev Patel, is British and his accent has been noted by several critics.[61] Similarly, though Boyle promotes *Slumdog* as "a hybrid of good things working together," three questions immediately arise: What type of "hybrid" does *Slumdog* constitute, what does "working together" precisely entail, and for whom does the film "work"?[62]

*Slumdog*'s producer, Christian Colson, for instance, has noted the difficulties the Indian cast and crew had in dealing with what he calls "the militaristic style of a British operation."[63] Similarly, as the earlier segments of this article have demonstrated, *Slumdog* remains an essentially Western film (rather than a "hybrid")—its resemblance to Bollywood is, as Dennis Lim notes, "superficial."[64] Yet, in the process of being an essentially British operation with the superficial veneer of hybridity, an answer to the remaining question (of whom such a concoction "works for") is provided. Boyle claims that, while making the film, people in the Indian slums asked if he intended to display their poverty, "because that's what Westerners always do."[65] His response has indeed been not to remain mired in India's poverty and squalor but, paraphrasing A.R. Rahman, to soar above it, occasionally swooping down to get a graphic glimpse but never missing a beat, as it were. This is a film, after all, to be consumed by Western audiences and it is precisely for such an audience that the film "works" (as a superficially hybrid production). It is also in this sense that the film is ultimately not so much about 'the real India' as it is about the West's own conceptions of India and its atavistic desire for an earlier, simpler narrative.[66] Here we see the reformulation of what Nandy described as the familiar into the lovably (or at least tolerably) strange, even as this reformulation reaffirms the essential(ist) difference between the First and Third worlds.

One wonders what Danny Boyle meant when he called *Slumdog* a "very subversive" film.[67] Nearly eighty years ago, a young German playwright wrote of attempts to "renovate" the existing theatre without changing its "culinary character." A new form of entertainment, however, the dramaturge concluded, needed to reckon with "new appetites."[68] *Slumdog*, while making claims to a new recipe, employs the same (old) ingredients in serving up the 'spicy', 'ethnic' dish that satisfies, rather than takes away, its intended consumer's appetite. If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, then *Slumdog*'s success demonstrates both the West's insatiable hunger for the "glowing, rotten fruit" of India and the willingness of comprador critics to dish out praise for such strange (yet familiar) concoctions. "From monkey brains to slumdogs might not seem like a giant evolutionary step," writes one, "but in Hollywood terms it's really a miracle."[69] "I wanted to be a little more angry about it, but I wasn't," claims another, adding, "It's been a long time since Gandhi."[70]

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**Notes**

1   There tends to be some slippage between these terms (Western/ global), especially in the American imaginary. It is precisely within the interstices of such slippage that the American Academy Awards take place and, as we will see, a film such as *Gandhi* or *Slumdog* is said to 'speak for' those not in attendance, i.e., Indians.

2   Hamid Dabashi, "Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire." *Al Ahram Weekly On-line*, 1-7 June 2006. (http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/797/special.htm)

3   Boyle qtd. in Fareed Zakaria, "Slum Voyeurism?" *Newsweek* International Edition, 30 Jan. 2009. (http://www.newsweek.com/id/182341)

4   Anand Giridharadas, "Horatio Alger Relocates to a Mumbai Slum." *New York Times*, 17 Jan. 2009. (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/18/weekinreview/18giridharadas.html)

5   Dennis Lim, "What, Exactly, Is *Slumdog Millionaire*? Is it a) a portrait of the real India, b) a Bollywood-style melodrama, c) a fairy tale, or d) a stylishly shot collection of clichés?" *Slate*, 26 Jan. 2009. (http://www.slate.com/id/2209783/pagenum/all/)

6   Sandip Roy, "The New Bollywood." *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 Feb. 2009: 16.

7   Some of these include *The New York Times*' Somini Sengupta, who claims that "despite the director's strenuous denials, it [*Slumdog*] could well be a Bollywood film"; Shekhar Deshpande, who claims "*Slumdog Millionaire* is an 'Indian' film in the sense that it borrows the narrative and aesthetic elements of Bollywood"; and Anupama Chopra, who calls *Slumdog* "pure Bollywood in its feel-good factor, the fantastical story line and the absolute loopholes in logic." See, respectively, "Extreme Mumbai, Without Bollywood's Filtered Lens," in the *New York Times*, 11 Nov. 2008; "A

Million Slumdogs Now," in *Little India*, 13 Feb. 2009; and "The New Bollywood," in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 Feb. 2009.

8   Sengupta's piece in the *Times* provides a good example of this trend, beginning with its title and also when the author points out that "*Slumdog* is decidedly not Bollywood in one crucial aspect: It was shot on the streets of Mumbai," thus rendering it, in her opinion, more 'realistic' than Bollywood films which employ "more exotic locales (Brooklyn, for instance)." See "Extreme Mumbai."
(http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/16/movies/16seng.html)

9   Here we see an instance of the 'fantasy sequence' that the Bush administration envisioned as it planned its incursion into Iraq—a fantasy, again, in no small part promoted by the comprador intelligentsia. Who better to make the case for an invasion of Iraq than an Iraqi?

10  Ashis Nandy, "Introduction," in *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability, and Indian Popular Cinema*. Ed. Nandy (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998): 2.

11  Ibid., 3.

12  On his blog, Bachchan writes: "Let it be known that a murky underbelly exists and thrives in the most developed nations." See Deshpande, "A Million Slumdogs." The numbers associated with film production and exhibition in India are also staggering, with over 800 films released every year and over ten million tickets sold every day. See Manjunath Pendakur, "India," in *The Asian Film Industry*. Ed. John A. Lent et al. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990): 230; and Pendakur, *Indian Popular Cinema: Industry, Ideology and Consciousness* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2003).

13  *Cinema India! TimesTalk* Panel, Asia Society, New York, NY, April 17, 2004.

14  Sengupta qtd. in Mark Magnier, "Indians Don't Feel Good About *Slumdog Millionaire*." *Los Angeles Times*, 24 Jan. 2009.
(http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/la-fg-india-slumdog24-2009jan24,0,1162547.story)

15  Rahman qtd. in Sandip Roy, "Composer is up for multiple Oscars." *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 Feb. 2009: 19.

16  E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984/[1924]): 1.

17  Ibid.

18  Rahman qtd. in Roy, "Composer is up…"

19  Alice Miles, "Shocked by *Slumdog*'s Poverty Porn." *The Times Online*, Jan. 14 2009. (http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/alice_miles/article5511650.ece)

20  David Denby, "Curious Cases: This Year's Oscar Picks." *The New Yorker*, 9-16 Feb. 2009: 119.

21  Ibid.

22  Latha Jishnu, "Slumdogs and fat cat bankers." *Business Standard*, 28 Feb. 2009. (http://www.business-standard.com/india/news/latha-jishnu-slum-dogsfat-cat-bankers/09/10/350372/)

23  Nandy, "Introduction," 13.

24  On nearly every occasion when I have mentioned Bollywood to Americans of non-Indian backgrounds, they respond, if at all, by citing films such as these.

25  Deshpande, "A Million Slumdogs," and Sengupta, "Extreme Mumbai," respectively. While Anthony Lane finds "the energy" in *Slumdog*'s end credits dance sequence (which he labels "a Bollywood dance number") "difficult to resist," Dennis Lim notes that "the limp dance number that closes the film lacks both the technique and the energy of vintage Bollywood." See, respectively, "Now Playing," in *The New Yorker*, 2 Feb. 2009: 18, and Lane's original review, "Hard Times," in *The New Yorker*, 24 Nov. 2009: 130; as well as Lim's "What, Exactly, Is *Slumdog Millionaire*?

26  Chopra qtd. in Roy, "The New Bollywood," 16.

27  Sengupta, "Extreme Mumbai."

28  For more on Bollywood's narrative rupturing, and how this differs from the strategies employed by Hollywood, see Ajay Gehlawat, "The Bollywood Song and Dance, or Making a Culinary Theatre from Dung-Cakes and Dust," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 23 (2006): 331-340.

29  Beaufoy qtd. in Roy, "'Slumdog''s Beaufoy wrote from the heart." *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 Feb. 2009: 17.

30  Carla Meyer, "'Slumdog Millionaire' isn't as big a winner…in Sacramento's Indian community." *Sacramento Bee*, 13 Feb. 2009: 26.

31  Chopra qtd. in Roy, "The New Bollywood," 16.

32  See, for instance, Giridharadas, "Horatio Alger Relocates to a Mumbai Slum."

33  It is ironic, given this difference, that *Slumdog*'s co-director, Loveleen Tandan, calls *Slumdog* "almost an homage to the '70s masala potboiler of Indian cinema." See Sengupta, "Extreme Mumbai." For more on the Amitabh Bachchan films of the 1970s, see Fareeduddin Kazmi's "How Angry is the Angry Young Man? 'Rebellion' in Conventional Hindi Films," in *The Secret Politics of Our Desires*, 134-155.

34  Nandy, "Introduction," 11.

35  Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993): 4.

36  Juluri qtd. in Roy, "The New Bollywood," 16. It remains a bit unclear what precisely is 'brought down to earth' here—one assumes the representation of 'India' in cinema. One might recall Rahman's description of his soundtrack for *Slumdog* at this juncture (see note 18). As a way of synthesizing these two characterizations of *Slumdog*, one might say the film is saved from coming to earth by its wings.

37  Chopra qtd. in Roy, "The New Bollywood," 16; Sengupta, "Extreme Mumbai"; Deshpande, "A Million Slumdogs Now." In the latter piece, Deshpande claims, "The film [*Slumdog*] is steeped in realism," and "once the realism of reality hits the screen, Bollywood squirms." (http://www.littleindia.com/news/125/ARTICLE/4509/2009-02-13.html)  See also notes 4 and 8.

38  Chakravarty, 4; Lim, "What Exactly is *Slumdog Millionaire*?"

39  Sengupta, "India Celebrates a Hollywood Victory." *New York Times*, 23 Feb. 2009. "Jai ho," as Sengupta goes on to note in her article, roughly translates as "Let there be victory." It is also the title of Rahman's Oscar-winning song from the film.
(http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/24/world/asia/24india.html)

40  Sengupta, "India Celebrates," and "Extreme Mumbai." At the same time, as Sengupta notes, "*Slumdog*, of course, is not an Indian film. It was backed by two American studios" ("India Celebrates").

41  Sanghvi qtd. in Sengupta, "India Celebrates."

42  See Sengupta, "India Celebrates," and Magnier, "Indians Don't Feel Good."

43  Qtd. in Lim, "What, Exactly, is *Slumdog Millionaire*?"

44  Giridharadas, "India Has a Soft Spot for Bush." *New York Times*, 11 Jan. 2009, 4. Note, again, the invocation of "the Indian people."

45  Ibid. Even as India, which never signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, was rewarded with access to U.S. nuclear fuel and technology, Iran, which did sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, was slapped with U.S. sanctions and identified as a member of the so-called "axis of evil."

46  Ibid. Interestingly enough, the game show, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* has just been licensed in Afghanistan. See Jishnu, "Slumdogs and fat cat bankers."

47  Giridharadas, "India Has a Soft Spot."

48  Deshpande, "A Million Slumdogs Now."

49  See Deshpande, "A Million Slumdogs," and Michael Dequina's online review of *Chandni Chowk to China*.
(http://www.imdb.com/Reviews/417/41766)

50  Giridharadas, "India Has a Soft Spot."

51  A.G. Sulzberger and Sewell Chan, "Gandhi Items Are Sold for $1.8 Million." *New York Times*, 5 Mar. 2009.
(http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/05/india-rejects-owners-proposal-on-gandhi-items/?ref=world)

52  Sulzberger and Chan, "Gandhi Items."

53  Shyamal Sengupta qtd. in Magnier, "Indians Don't Feel Good."

54  Magnier, "Indians Don't Feel Good."

55  Boyle. "10 Questions for Danny Boyle." *Time*, 19 Feb. 2009.
(http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1880635,00.html)

56  Ibid.

57  Nandy, "Introduction," 12.

58  Ibid.

59  Boyle, "10 Questions."

60  Boyle; and qtd. in Sengupta, "Extreme Mumbai." The only actor "from Bollywood" in the film is the game-show host, Anil Kapoor.

61  Somini Sengupta, for instance, points out, "Though he is a fine actor, Mr. Patel's accent gives away who he is: a Briton of Indian origin. Not a kid from a Mumbai slum." See "Extreme Mumbai."

62  Boyle, "10 Questions."

63  Colson qtd. in Sengupta, "Extreme Mumbai."

64  Lim, "What, Exactly, is *Slumdog Millionaire*?"

65  Boyle, "10 Questions."

66  Anthony Lane, for instance, calls *Slumdog* "an old-fashioned crowd-pleaser." See his "Hard Times," 130.

67  Boyle qtd. in Miles, "Shocked by Slumdog's Poverty Porn."

68  Bertolt Brecht, "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre." *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Trans. John Willett (Methuen & Co.: London, 1964/ [1930]): 33.

69  Roy, "Seeing India through a foreign lens." *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 Feb. 2009, 18. Roy goes on to say, "Some Indians still cringe because all the West ever seems to see of India is poverty. But others, like me, are just happy that onscreen Indians get to love, scheme, maim or get rich—but for their own sakes."

70  Juluri qtd. in Roy, "Seeing India." Juluri's further claim that *Slumdog* "was about finally being recognized," provides an instance of "all those Indians who view the approbation of the West as the ultimate litmus test." See Ashis Nandy and Vinay Lal, "Introduction: Popular Cinema and the Culture of Indian Politics," in *Fingerprinting Popular Culture: The Mythic and the Iconic in Indian Cinema*. Eds. Nandy and Lal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006): xi.

# Free Films Made Freely

## PAOLO GIOLI
### AND EXPERIMENTAL FILMMAKING IN ITALY

PATRICK RUMBLE

As a premise for my way of making films and working with film, the most important thing is the movie-camera understood almost as a laboratory (for the shooting and printing of films)... I express my love for the cinema through the movie-camera; in terms of time requirements and production costs, I'm beginning to invent them for myself. Free films made freely.

—Paolo Gioli

Given the large amount of attention that the Italian film industry routinely gets from scholars and critics, it is surprising how little we have come to know about avant-garde and experimental film-making in Italy. We understand a great deal about avant-garde films in France, Germany, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain, and yet Italy's contributions in this area have been almost entirely neglected by film scholars and historians in the English speaking world. Even in Italy, there is surprisingly little attention given to the filmic avant-gardes, beyond a relatively short list of studies by a handful of scholars—most notably Adriano Apra', Massimo Bacigalupo, Bruno Di Marino, Raffaele Milani, Carla Subrizi, Mario Verdone and a few others. It's certainly not for a lack of films and filmmakers, however. Ever since the Futurist filmmakers Bruno Corra and Arnaldo Ginna conducted their first experiments with music and projected light in the 1910s, Italian visual artists have explored the potential of film as an expressive medium.[1] The list of important filmmakers in the "Italian underground" would include the Futurists Corra, Ginna, F.T. Marinetti, Giacomo Balla, Emilio Settimelli, Remo Chiti (all co-authors of the Manifesto of Futurist Cinema in 1916 and the film, *A Futurist Life*, that resulted from it that same year) but also later filmmakers such as Luigi Veronesi, Cioni Carpi, Silvio and Vittorio Loffredo, Nato Frasca', and a long list of filmmakers associated with the Italian neo-avant-garde, including Paolo Gioli, one of the few contemporary filmmakers still experimenting on celluloid. These names represent a vast continent of audio-visual experimentation that remains greatly under-explored—and almost entirely unknown in North America. In what follows, my goal is to shed some new light on experimental filmmaking in Italy, focusing primarily on films made since the 1960s, and to do so by examining some aspects of the work of Paolo Gioli. One of Italy's most important contemporary experimental filmmakers, Gioli inherits the legacies of the European and North American avant-gardes while fashioning a body of work whose unique contributions to the theory and practice of experimental film we are now in a position to recognize.
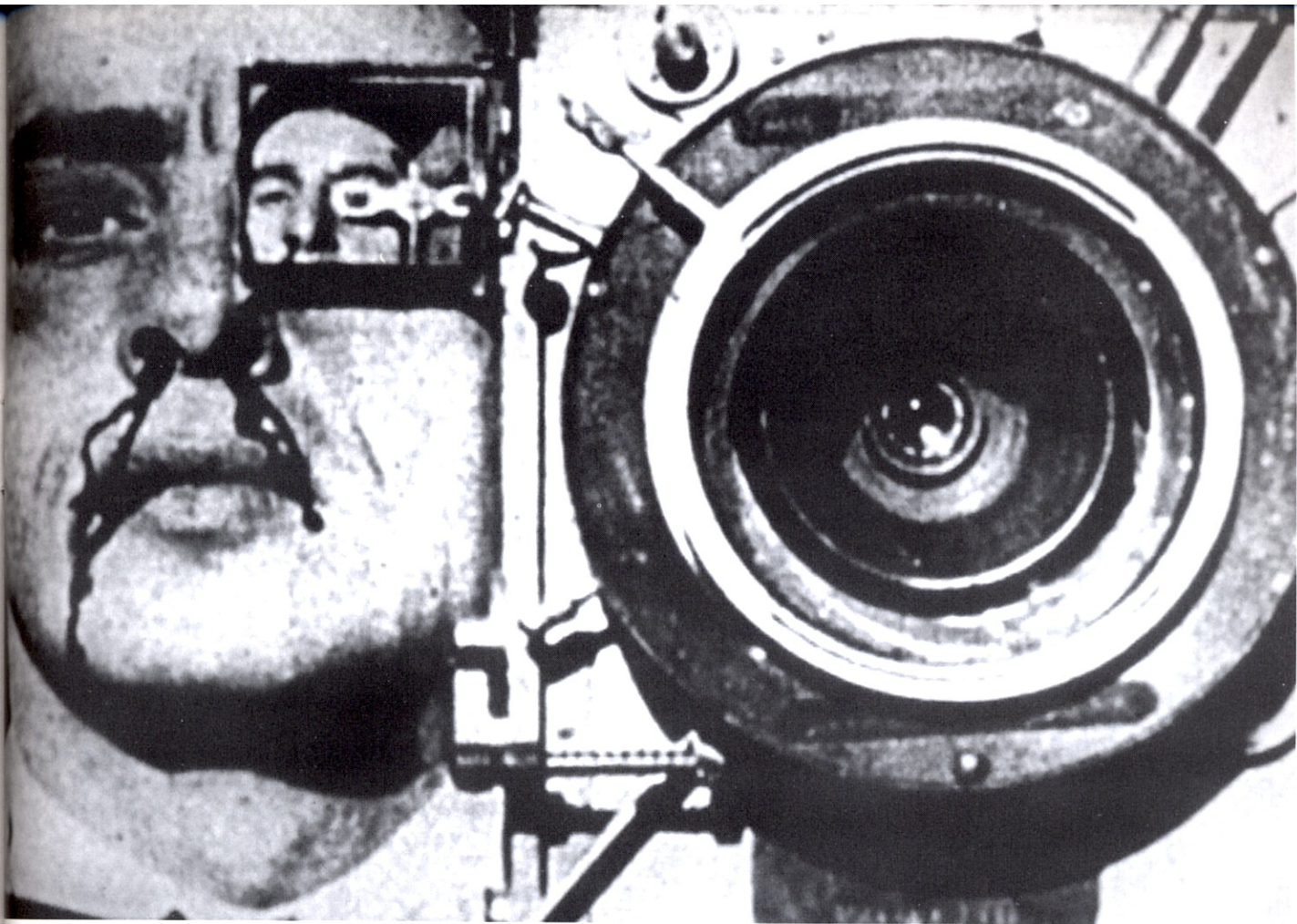
*L'Operatore Perforato* (The Perforated Cameraman), 16mm, 8'53", 1979. Optical printing of found-footage from a salvaged Pathe 9.5mm film, a film gauge that used a single sprocket hole centered on the frame-line. As Gioli told me in relation to this film: "There would be no cinema without the sprocket hole."

## Neo-Avant-Garde Film in Italy

Independent cinema…is today a reality even in Italy. The phenomenon first spread from the United States towards Anglo-Saxon Europe, subsequently touching upon the entire continent. As usual, we are last in this race… This cinema must, slowly but surely, become a cinema of liberation …. This cinema is nothing other than a cinema of revolt.[2]
—Editorial Board, *Ombre elettriche*, 1967

Even a general understanding of Gioli's films might benefit from some historical contextualization. Avant-garde filmmaking in Italy—that is, the elaboration of a collective mode of independent film production, distribution and exhibition—had two important historical moments over the last century: Futurist filmmaking, taking place during the 1910s, followed several decades later, by a second, neo-avant-garde film movement identified with the Independent Film Cooperative (the Cooperativa Cinema Indipendente, or CCI) of the late 1960s. While there certainly were filmmakers experimenting in non-commercial film in the decades between these two movements, their work was largely produced outside any clearly defined film movement: most notably by Luigi Veronesi in the 1930s–40s, followed by Silvio and Vittorio Loffredo and Cioni Carpi in the 1950s–60s (Carpi completed many of his films outside Italy, including his outstanding animated film *One Day an Airplane* which he made in Montreal in 1963 with support from the National Film Board of Canada). While the Loffredo brothers would become protagonists in the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s, the work of Veronesi and Carpi was made largely in isolation, and the destruction of many of Veronesi's films during the bombardments of the World War II has made any thorough appreciation of his work rather challenging.[3] Among other things, Veronesi and Carpi represent a tendency of camera-less filmmaking in Italy that culminates, most recently, in at least some of the work of Paolo Gioli.

It was in the early 1960s that many more artists began to experiment with film, thanks to the availability of fairly inexpensive, consumer-grade film cameras, allowing for the production of very inexpensive 16mm and, later, 8mm films.[4] The best known of these filmmakers worked in Turin, Florence, Rome and Naples, and included the Loffredo brothers, along with Alfredo Leonardi, Massimo Bacigalupo, Paolo Brunatto, Nato Frasca', Antonio De Bernardi, Giorgio Turi, Roberto Capanna, Alberto Grifi, Anna Lojolo, Guido Lombardi,

Gianfranco Baruchello, Mario Schifano, Luca Patella, Ugo Nespolo, Piero Bargellini, Pia Epremian, Andrea Granchi, Sirio Luginbuhl, Luigi Ontani, Anna Miscuglio, the Vergine brothers (Adamo, Aldo and Antonio), and several others. At least in part inspired by new models of independent film collectives in Europe and North America, several of these filmmakers joined together in May, 1967, to form the Cooperativa Cinema Indipendente (or CCI). The organization of an Italian film cooperative designed to promote the production, distribution and exhibition of experimental films—the elaboration of a parallel market alongside the studio system—emulated, in particular, the rise of the Filmmakers' Cooperatives in New York City and London. However, even before this, and perhaps more important in terms of the aesthetic developments in Italy, were the first exhibitions in Italy of experimental films from the United States. Of particular importance were programs of American avant-garde films brought to Italy on separate occasions between 1964 and 1967, the first presented by P. Adams Sitney (who secured his conscientious objector status during the Vietnam war by agreeing with his Draft Board to lecture about film in Europe) and thereafter by Jonas Mekas, founder of the New York Filmmakers' Coop. These programs in particular helped to spark a fertile period of experimentation in Italy. The CCI was legally based in Naples, under Adamo Vergine's coordination, though its center of gravity was surely Rome. While it was a short-lived project, formally dissolving in 1969, it helped inaugurate a period of intense productivity and innovation in experimental film that lasted long after the formal dissolution of the CCI two years after its founding.

The first program of films by the CCI was shown at the Filmstudio gallery in Rome, which opened in October of 1967 in order to promote independent filmmaking in Italy—and to this day, the Filmstudio is an important outlet for experimental films in Rome (including, most recently, a massive retrospective of the Italian underground cinema in 2003). The film journal most associated with the CCI was the Turin-based Ombre elettriche (Electric Shadows). This journal, which presented itself forcefully in its first issue as one of the mouthpieces of Italian underground film—calling for a cinema of liberation and revolt—published three issues in 1967, before it too dissolved, due to disagreements over the proper responsibilities (aesthetic vs. revolutionary) of filmmakers. (Other film journals that gave sustained attention to experimental film at this time, thanks in large measure to film critic and historian Adriano Apra', included Filmcritica and Cinema & film.) The CCI was an attempt by a coordinated avant-garde collective to sustain and promote an alternative cinema in Italy, and to shelter filmmakers from the economic constraints of commercial cinema. One of the interesting results of the new film cooperative was a collectively-authored film entitled Tutto Tutto nello stesso istante (Everything, Everything All at Once), made in 1968, in which the activity of the individual filmmakers was subordinated to the aesthetic of the group—a sort of neo-avant-garde, collectivist approach to film production already rehearsed by Marinetti's group fifty years earlier in the making of A Futurist Life. It was, however, the only experiment in collective authorship the CCI filmmakers carried out. The CCI filmmakers (along with other filmmakers working in the orbit of the CCI, including perhaps most importantly the Florence School of experimental filmmakers such as Andrea Granchi, Massimo Becattini, and others[5]) produced an

impressive quantity of films. Indeed, such productive energies remained generally undiminished through at least the mid-1970s but, with the arrival of portable video (the Portapaks produced by Sony, Akai, JVC, and Panasonic), most motion picture artists abandoned film in favor of the new medium. Indeed, video very nearly sounded the death knell for experimental filmmaking, and not only in Italy.

Like most film movements, the CCI was a short-lived project. It was disbanded by the end of 1969, mainly due to conflicts within the group about what the proper goal of art filmmaking should be, with some insisting that their films should promote social and economic revolution (in the didactic mode of guerilla filmmaking and propaganda for the political parties and movements of the Left) while others defended the principle of artistic freedom: the notion that art should remain the domain for non-dogmatic expression. Emblematic in this regard is experimental filmmaker Massimo Bacigalupo's suggestion, in an important description of the rise and fall of the CCI (of which he was a central figure), that "you don't have to talk about the king in order to make political films."[6] The aesthetic and ideological passions underlying Bacigalupo's statement were those that had contributed to the break-up of the CCI—and indeed such schisms are emblematic of the ideological and aesthetic tensions that conditioned all of the arts during the late 60s and 70s, as any study of the literary neo-avant-gardes, for example, would readily show. Be that as it may, the CCI's experiment in creative and economic autonomy for experimental filmmakers would have lasting effects in the years that followed, not least of all among feminist film collectives of the decade that followed (i.e. the Feminist Film Collective set up in Rome by Anna Miscuglio, and the Nemesis collective led by Lina Mangiacapre in Naples).[7] By 1980, certainly, whatever was left of avant-garde energies would be directed towards video, with groups such as Videobase (emerging directly from the CCI) and Studio Azzurro leading the way.[8]

## Paolo Gioli: Free Films Made Freely
Paolo Gioli emerges against the backdrop of this moment of ideological and aesthetic (dis)integration associated with the Italian neo-avant-gardes in general, and with the CCI in particular. While his first films are made around the time of the CCI's formal dissolution in 1969, his work was quickly integrated into exhibitions organized, in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, by what was left of the CCI group—a group with which he has been identified ever since. Since 1969, Gioli has made well over 30 films, almost exclusively using the 16mm film gauge, with occasional use of Super 8mm and video. As we shall see in what follows, one of the distinguishing aspects of Gioli's work is his deconstructive attitude towards motion picture technology, as seen in his early tendency toward hand-painted films as well as in his unusual manipulations of camera mechanisms and optics, and his very unique interest in constructing his own pin-hole movie cameras from readily available materials for several of his films. Gioli's engagement with the mechanisms of motion picture technology and the formal constraints of the medium results in a body of work that belongs to the "structuralist" tendency of experimental filmmaking—a tendency that, with the exception of Gioli, never gained serious traction in Italy, as it did elsewhere in Europe and North America. Ever suspicious of technology and the consumerist

culture that constrains motion picture artists, Gioli belongs to a history of avant-garde filmmaking whose roots are in early 20th-Century Europe while its most recent products result from an on-going transatlantic dialogue about the expressive capacities and ethical responsibilities of the cinema.

Born in 1942 in the Sarzano district of the city of Rovigo, not far from Venice, Gioli attended art school at the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice, where he studied painting and specialized in portraiture. During this time, Gioli developed his knowledge of European avant-garde film, watching films by Vertov, Richter, Ruttmann, and others at the Archives of the Venice Biennale and at the Galleria di Cardazzo. Gioli was especially struck by what he saw as the combination of film and painting in Richter's abstract animations from the 1920s (i.e. *Rhythmus 21*). Gioli's first impulse to make films dates from this period of study in Venice, and his filmography confirms the decisive influence of the European avant-gardes.

In 1967 Gioli traveled to New York City, where he set up a painting studio and spent the next year working and immersing himself in the Manhattan art scene. Soon after his arrival the in U.S. he was awarded a John Cabot Fund scholarship in support of his painting. During the one year he spent in New York, he encountered the work of North American experimental filmmakers associated with the New American Cinema. Gioli has recalled watching experimental films at a little cinema in Manhattan that he stumbled upon by chance—and to which he never returned after a police raid soon thereafter.[9] In the summer of 1968, after his visa had run out and in the political climate that arose after the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, Gioli was forced to leave the United States by the U.S. Immigration Office. However, sometime in the months before his departure, Gioli had the good fortune to befriend an international lawyer named Paolo Vampa whom he met at the Rizzoli Bookshop in Manhattan. Since their meeting, Vampa has played an enormously productive role in Gioli's artistic career, combining the essential functions of producer, agent, and collector.

It was Vampa who supplied Gioli with the funds for his first movie camera—a second-hand 16mm Paillard Bolex—using money that Vampa had received as a gift at his wedding in July of 1969. Gioli has spoken eloquently about this camera, describing how he used it the way the first Lumiere cameramen did in the late 1800s: as a machine for shooting film and as an optical printer. However, it is important to note that Gioli's first film, *Traces of Traces*, which he made in 1969 after his return to Italy, was made without a movie camera, applying pigments to clear leader, using his fingers, hands, arms and other body parts, as well as paint brushes and rubber stamps. *Traces of Traces* is a record of the impressions made by the artist's body, including the texture of skin and contours of the flesh—and we should not forget that the Italian word for film is *pellicola* (from *pelle*: skin). Gioli makes his first film-*pellicola* as an analogue of skin, both conceived as the interface between the human being and the outside world. It is a film that announces one of the central concerns of all of Gioli's work to follow: the human body, desire, and the physical and psychological processes involved in sense perception. To that end, Gioli set out to make films as tactile experiences, tracing the traces of the maker's hands, the way a ceramicist's hand is visible on the finished vessel. This is a painter's film, in the way he works up the surface, making the celluloid into a recipient of embodied gestures. Ultimately, what is presented visually can be seen as a registration of a pulsating energy taking form, becoming visible—we might call his first film a representation of thinking as haptic encounter with objects, a registration of perceiving. It is a visually stunning contribution to the tradition of hand-painted films whose most significant practitioners include Ginna, Corra, Veronesi and Carpi, in Italy, and Stan Brakhage, Harry Smith, and Norman McLaren in North America.

Gioli's preoccupation with perception will be found in all of his films, certainly—and his most recent film, *Rothkofilm* (2008), is a homage to a painter whose ambition was to counter the "visual laws" that were institutionalized during the Renaissance with the "tactile mode" of modern painting. Among Rothko's ambition was to make paintings that were not "illusions" of objective reality but rather objective "facts" in themselves, such that he is able to suggest that modern painting, such as his own, might encroach upon the domain of the sculptor: "the picture is a thing of paint on a flat surface, and there is no need to make it appear as something else..."[10] Gioli, too, makes films that call upon a tactile response in his viewers—we might call them "things of imprinted celluloid"—and to do so requires that he do battle, as Rothko did for painting, with



*Tracce di tracce* (Traces of Traces), 16mm, 7'0", 1969. This is Gioli's very first film. Techniques include hand-painting, rubber stamps, and scratching.
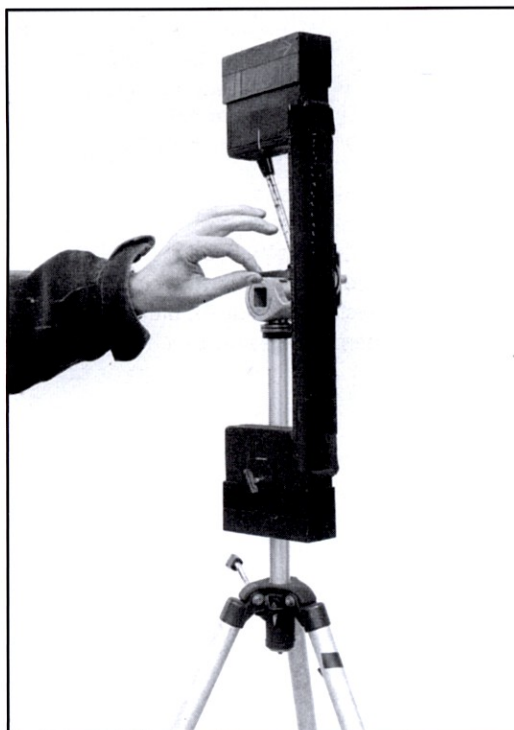
*Rothkofilm,* 16mm, 5'0", 2008. Gioli re-photographed Rothko paintings found in art books.
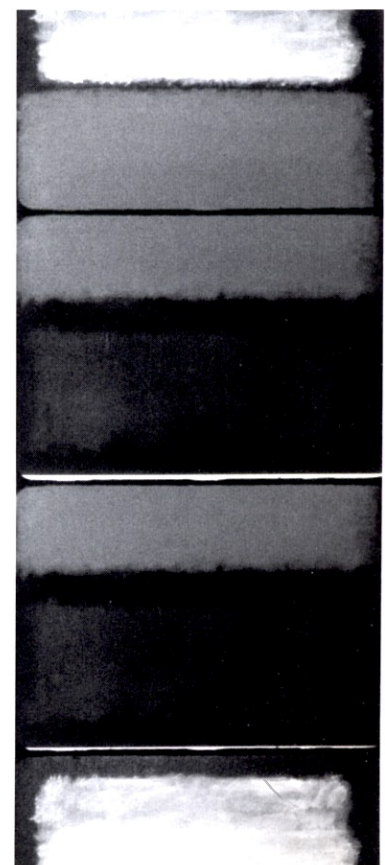
Hand as external shutter. Technique used in "Images Overwhelmed by Duchamp's Wheel", resulting in various flicker effects depending upon the rhythm of the hand.
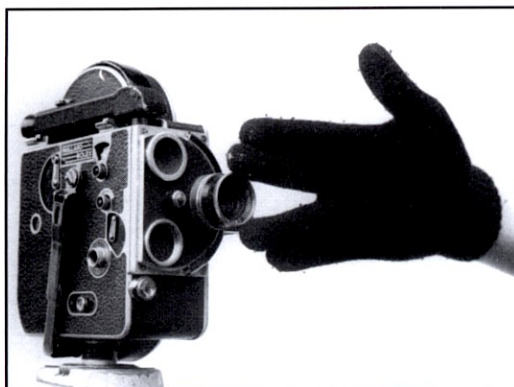


Pin-hole motion picture camera, used by Gioli for "Film Stenopeico" (1973-1981-1989).



Bicycle wheel/ spokes used as external shutter. Technique used in "Images Overwhelmed by Duchamp's Wheel," resulting in various flicker effects depending on the spin-rate of the wheel. The device is a re-make of Duchamp's ready-made sculpture.

PHOTOS: GIOVANNI CAPPELLO

the inherited "naturalist" and "illusionary" burdens of his medium—in this case, its photographic basis. And nowhere is the question of perception more central than in the films he makes without a movie camera, using his own home-made pin-hole cameras, or using his Paillard Bolex after stripping out the shutter mechanism, replacing it with various external shutters, including the human hand as well as fascinating devices he builds in his studio. The films that result, including his astonishingly beautiful *Pinhole Film*, subtitled *Man without a Movie Camera*, are surely among Gioli's most significant contributions to experimental filmmaking.

Gioli's experiments in pin-hole cinematography took place after 1970, following his return from the United States and his eventual transfer from Venice to Rome. By the time Gioli arrived at the nation's capitol, in search, he says, of an avant-garde that might accommodate him, he found that the CCI had already disbanded, at least formally. Gioli was introduced to what was left of the CCI group by fellow filmmaker Alfredo Leonardi, but by then, he has said, "everything had become politicized." While continuing to work in film, he also began experimenting with photography—making photographs with what he called "stenopeic" devices (from the Greek *stenos opaios*, narrow aperture). He began building many different sorts of pin-hole cameras from very unusual materials, including boxes of various dimensions, shipping tubes and containers, sea-shells, loaves of bread, walnuts, saltine crackers, perforated soup ladles, buttons, traffic cones, cheese graters, salt shakers, and the human hand. He also experimented with large-format pin-hole cameras using large sheets of Polaroid positive film—certainly his favorite film, which he has called "the delicate epidermis, the humid incunabulum of human history"—and he was an early practitioner of Polaroid transfers. (The history of the artistic use of Polaroid film must reserve a significant chapter for Gioli's experiments with that now-obsolete and much-mourned film.) Indeed, outside the world of filmmaking, Gioli is well-known for his photographic experiments using pin-hole devices, and there are several catalogues of his photographs in circulation.[11] But what is interesting, and quite unique, is how he extended his experiments in pin-hole photography to motion pictures.

Gioli has made several pin-hole motion picture cameras since the early 1970s, and indeed, he has been working on his great masterpiece of pin-hole cinema, *Pinhole Film (Man without a Movie Camera)*, on and off since 1973. *Pinhole Film* is made with a very unusual camera fashioned from a 1 1/2 foot-long rectangular tube whose entire length has been perforated with pin-hole apertures along one side, such that multiple exposures can be made on lengths of 16mm film that pass through the tube between a film cartridge at the

top and a take-up reel at the bottom. With this device, Gioli says, he "explores" what is in front of him, recording the world without the interference of optical lenses, and without the imposition of a single, stable perspective. Moreover, since the stenopeic camera lacks the usual shutter mechanism, using only a hinged door operated by hand to control exposure times, there are no frame-lines. (This suppression of the frame-line is also found in other films, such as *Filmfinish* [1989] and *Images Overtaken by Duchamp's Wheel* [1994], made with either shutter-less cameras or with external shutter devices). Given the rudimentary nature of the shutter device on his pin-hole camera, the exposures on the film strip—according to my count, each exposure of a length of 16mm film in *Pinhole Film* created 47 frames, or just over two seconds of projected image at 18fps—merge together in diffused lap-dissolves of very simple images of windows, bodies, household objects, tree and plants, that are remarkable for their auroral beauty. The irregular dimensions of the apertures, the slight variations in the distance between apertures and in the length of exposure, all combine to lend Gioli's images their fragile intensity. This strong sense of fragility is heightened all the more by the occasional flash of light leaks that threaten the image with obliteration. The vulnerability of Gioli's images, produced by the direct exposure of film to the artist's surroundings, communicates an experience of a world of tremendous energetic intensity—an intensity that Gioli's celluloid, like his eyes, can apprehend and "capture" but only at its own peril.

Such profoundly aesthetic motivations, however, coexist with ideological ones as well, and these should not be discounted. Gioli insists that one of his motivations in making films without the camera technology—or using what we might call "prepared" cameras, with significant alterations to mechanical and optical components—was to avoid what he termed the consumerist technology of the cinema: he wanted "to make free films freely."[12] And Gioli has stated his criticisms of the Italian commercial cinema, and its funding mechanisms (or lack thereof) very clearly over the decades. Moreover, he has insisted on the importance of exercising personal control over every aspect of filmmaking, including film development, editing, and printing. This is an attitude he inherits from earlier avant-garde practices, and one he defends fiercely.

Furthermore, Gioli does not hesitate in many of his films to express political messages—usually concerning war, social regimentation, and consumerism, as seen in such films as *Anonimatografo* (1972), *Filmarilyn* (1992), or *Children* (2008). The latter film's parallel montage of White House photographs of JFK holding his infant daughter Caroline on his lap intercut with the piled bodies of napalmed children in Vietnam provides challenging messages regarding war and media politics, from Vietnam to Iraq. And yet his filmmaking is not only motivated by such political and economic concerns. Or rather, he refuses to distinguish aesthetic exploration from the necessity of ideological renovation—he does not, like the editors of *Ombre elettriche*, see aesthetics ("poetry") as post-revolutionary ornamentation.

Thus, even in the films like *Pinhole Film* in which Gioli seems to be mainly involved in structural investigations of the medium and "poetic" expressions of fragile revery, Gioli's work remains animated by profound ethical concerns. Clearly Gioli's experiments with pin-hole and prepared cameras represent a sustained reflection on the aesthetic capacities and enabling



*Immagini travolte dalla ruota di Duchamp* (Images Overwhelmed by Duchamp's Wheel), 16mm, 13'3", 1994. A homage to Duchamp and his optical experiments. The film makes occasional use of external shutter devices, including the human hand and a bicycle wheel.

technologies of photography and film. Indeed, the film seems to express his desire to return to the origins—to a time before the institutionalization of the medium as narrative entertainment—and thus to offer the cinema a chance for a new beginning, a fresh start. Indeed, ultimately Gioli's investigations center on the physical and psychological processes of perception and cognition, an examination of how we sense things (not only visually), and how those things arrive through the senses of the body to be processed through language and concepts and finally to be registered in memory. The ethical basis of Gioli's art is found in its focus on the body and its sensual encounter with the earth. For Gioli, the film camera locates—in the mysterious, apertured interior of the *camera obscura*—an analogous encounter with the earth as it registers itself onto light-sensitive materials. And this analogy between the camera and the human body—the body with its apertures and orifices, with its skin—will be the dominant leitmotif of all his films, beginning with his first gesture of pressing his pigmented body to clear celluloid. This concern for human body and the psychological and physical forces that constrain it, this commitment to the body's sensational potential, is what provides Gioli's work with its ethical force.

Gioli's ethical and aesthetic interest in film as a surface upon which the earth imprints its image—he speaks of the "writing" (*scrittura*) of the movie-camera—also leads to his subsequent meditations on motion and the historical development of motion pictures out of the camera obscuras of the Renaissance and various other optical devices and retinal toys of the 19th-century. Indeed, these are the interests that will become ever more central to Gioli's work, especially after his experiments in stenopeic cinema, as seen in films such as *Little Decomposed Film* (1986). In this film's re-animation of Edweard Muybridge's sequences of social outcasts and the physically abnormal whose naked bodies are photographed against the measured grid of Muybridge's stage, Gioli combines a disturbing Foucaultian meditation on the scientific use of film technology for social engineering together with an examination of the central paradox of the cinema: the fact that there is nothing moving in motion pictures, besides the regulated flow of 18 to 24 frames of celluloid per second through a projector (indeed, Gioli's film *Perforated Operator* from 1979 represents one of the

greatest meditations on the sprocket hole ever produced). However, Gioli's cinema takes us even further back than the creation-myth of proto-cinema—through the Thaumatropes, Phenakistoscopes and first chronophotographic devices—back towards the birthplace of photographic images, the first positive Heliographic image of a window in Joseph Niepce's studio. (Niepce's image, as well as similar photographs by Fox Talbot, are in fact reprised in the opening section of *Pinhole Film*, entitled "Window.") And it is at that moment of photographic invention, it seems, that Gioli locates the splitting of nature between the earth and its representation, between reality and its picture, as cinema's primordial wound, to which the history of its development can be seen to respond. It is a wound that gives rise to the desires for visual reconciliation, and thus for marketable narrative and ideological satisfactions, that have fueled cinema since the elaboration of motion picture technology—or rather, for Gioli, since the invention of the sprocket hole and the frameline. Yet it is also the source of creative imagination and linguistic invention—the "poetry" that emanates from the interstices between signifiers and signifieds. It is a splitting that is thematized, in films such as *Traumatograph* (1973), through images of lacerated bodies, bloodied noses and mouths, and the sliced eye of Bunuel's *Andalusian Dog*—a film, and a surrealist tradition based on a Freudian philosophy of split subjectivity, to which Gioli pays homage very frequently, as in *When the Eye Trembles* (1989). Moreover, lacerated consciousness is also rendered visually through the artist's frequent use of heavily layered imagery and split frames that conjoin positive and negative images of Gioli's contorted and agonized face in specular symmetry, as found in *According to My Glass Eye* (1972). That is, in Gioli's often frantically cut films, the procedures of editing and montage—including the vertical montage of collaged, optically printed film strips in *Commutations with Mutation* (1969)—seem ever to repeat the splitting away of human consciousness from nature, with each cut reenacting the animating wound of the alienated modern(ist) artist. However, in a perhaps paradoxical fashion, Gioli's pin-hole cameras, with their film strips immediately exposed to the world, express the artist's regressive desire for a clearing away of alienating consciousness and a return to an *energeia* of nature—to an experience of conceptually unbound phenomena—that tempts the artist with the promise of knowledge, though at the cost of oblivion. Paradoxes such as this attest to the depth of Gioli's experimentation across four decades and more than thirty films; and they suggest the extent to which Gioli inherits and reworks the legacies of the surrealist avant-gardes as well as the New American Cinema he first encountered in New York City in the late 1960s.

One of the last of the generation of filmmakers to emerge from the period of the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s—when the Italian underground flourished, briefly, in dialogue with developments in North America—Gioli's work represents a continuation of avant-garde investigations of the aesthetic and technological materials of the medium. The avant-garde legacy is clearly signified, throughout Gioli's filmography, in his frequent quotations from Duchamp, Vertov, Eisenstein, Richter and Bunuel. What he inherits from such artists, and the movements they were associated with, is an engagement with the structural aspects of the cinema and with the psychology of visual perception studied against the development of photographic technologies since the 19th Century. Certainly, the

publication of a two-disk DVD set (produced by Paolo Vampa and available through RaroVideo.com) has helped to increase awareness of his work among film scholars and audiences alike. And as the recent increase in attention dedicated to him at cinematheques in Madison, Toronto, New York, Paris, and Hong Kong would indicate, Gioli is rapidly being recognized as one of the most important experimental filmmakers working in Europe since the 1960s, and it is arguable that he is the most significant experimentalist working in Italy today. (Indeed, a retrospective of Gioli's work will feature at the Pesaro Film Festival in June of 2009, where Gioli also plans to premier his most recent productions.) Ever refusing to divorce poetics from ideology—and stubbornly insisting on a "do it yourself" creative autonomy that is exemplary in its resistance to any fetishization of technology—Gioli makes art in which aesthetic experimentation might be a prelude to psychological and ideological renovation. To that extent, each of his films—though none more than his pinhole films—express a desire for a new beginning, a fresh start, both for filmmaking and for sense perception. And perhaps this, most of all, is the task of avant-garde and experimental film artists from Futurism to today: to make films that take spectators to the very edge of human understanding, to the very limits of their own selves, where they can open their eyes, perhaps, and see what is there.

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### Notes

1   For his attention to early Futurist film experiments and an excellent survey of European avant-garde filmmaking, see Antonio Bisaccia, *Punctum fluens. Comunicazione estetica e movimento tra cinema e arte nelle avanguardie storiche* (Rome: Meltemi, 2002).

2   From the December 1967 founding editorial of the journal of Italian underground cinema *Ombre elettriche*, reprinted in *Bianco e nero* (May-August 1974), pp. 152-53.

3   On the films of Carpi and Veronesi, with a selection of writings by both, see *Luigi Veronesi e Cioni Carpi alla Cineteca Italiana*, L. Caramel and A. Madesani, eds. (Milan: Il Castoro, 2002).

4   For an excellent history of experimental film in Italy during this period, see Bruno Di Marino, *Sguardo, inconscio, azione: Cinema sperimentale e underground a Roma (1965-1975)* (Rome: Lithos, 1999); see also Adriano Apra', "L'underground," in *Prima della rivoluzione: Schermi italiani (1960-1990)* (Venice: Marsilio, 1997).

5   On experimental film in Florence and Tuscany, see Silvia Lucchesi, *Cinema d'artista in Toscana 1952-1980* (Prato: Centro L. Pecci, 2004).

6   See Massimo Bacigalupo's Introduction to the special issue on Italian experimental film in *Bianco e nero*, nos. 5-8 (May-August 1974), p. 8.

7   For an excellent introduction to feminist filmmaking in Italy, with a very useful essay on the history of women's film in Italy by Anna Miscuglio, see *Off Screen: Women and Film in Italy*, edited by Giuliana Bruno and Maria Nadotti (London: Routledge, 1988).

8   On the history of video in Italy, see *Elettroshock: 30 anni di video in Italia (1971-2001)*, edited by Bruno Di Marino and Lara Nicoli (Rome: Castelvecchi, 2001).

9   The author wishes to thank Paolo Gioli for graciously sharing this, and other information, with the author for this essay.

10  Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 51-52.

11  See *Paolo Gioli: Gran Positivo nel crudele spazio stenopeico*, edited by P. Costantini, S. Fuso, S. Mescola, I. Zannier (Florence: Fratelli Alinari, 1991).

12  See the essay "Scritti per un rettangolo bianco" found in the booklet, edited by Paolo Vampa, accompanying the DVD set *Film di Paolo Gioli* (RaroVideo/Interferenze, 2005), p. 29.

# Screening the Borderland

## TRANSSEXUALISM AS CINEMATIC METAPHOR

CAROLYN KRAUS

Transsexuals are individuals born with the physiological and chromosomal identity of one gender, but who mentally and emotionally believe they belong to the opposite gender. They consider their condition a mistake of nature, a congenital anomaly. The medical term for transsexualism is "Gender Identity Disorder." The term "transgenderism" is used in a broader sense and as a definition/description of gender identity variations that include transvestites, cross-dressers, transsexuals, persons of ambiguous genitalia, and hermaphrodites.

—Dr. Sherman Leis, Philadelphia sex-reassignment specialist

In an early scene from Duncan Tucker's *Transamerica* (2005), Bree Osborne, a physiological male about to undergo sex-reassignment surgery, walks along a white picket fence and joins a group of people waiting at a bus stop. Amid muffled Spanish conversations, a man reads a Spanish-language newspaper. A sign in the background reads: "Immigration Forms." These people have recently crossed borders of their own.

Bree Osborne is only one of the more recent examples in a five-decades-long pageant of cinematic transsexual characters appearing in American and Western European films that fall along a spectrum from freak-show sexploitation, to earnest depictions of gender identity struggles, to the metaphorical use of transsexualism in exploring sexual, racial, religious, and political attitudes. Perhaps because the very concept of transsexualism invites metaphor, shatters boundaries, and complicates polarities, each of these films—even the most exploitive among them—invites the audience to associate transsexualism with other kinds of boundaries and intersections and raises fundamental questions that the filmmaker may or may not have intended. What do we believe about gender and

*In a Year of Thirteen Moons*
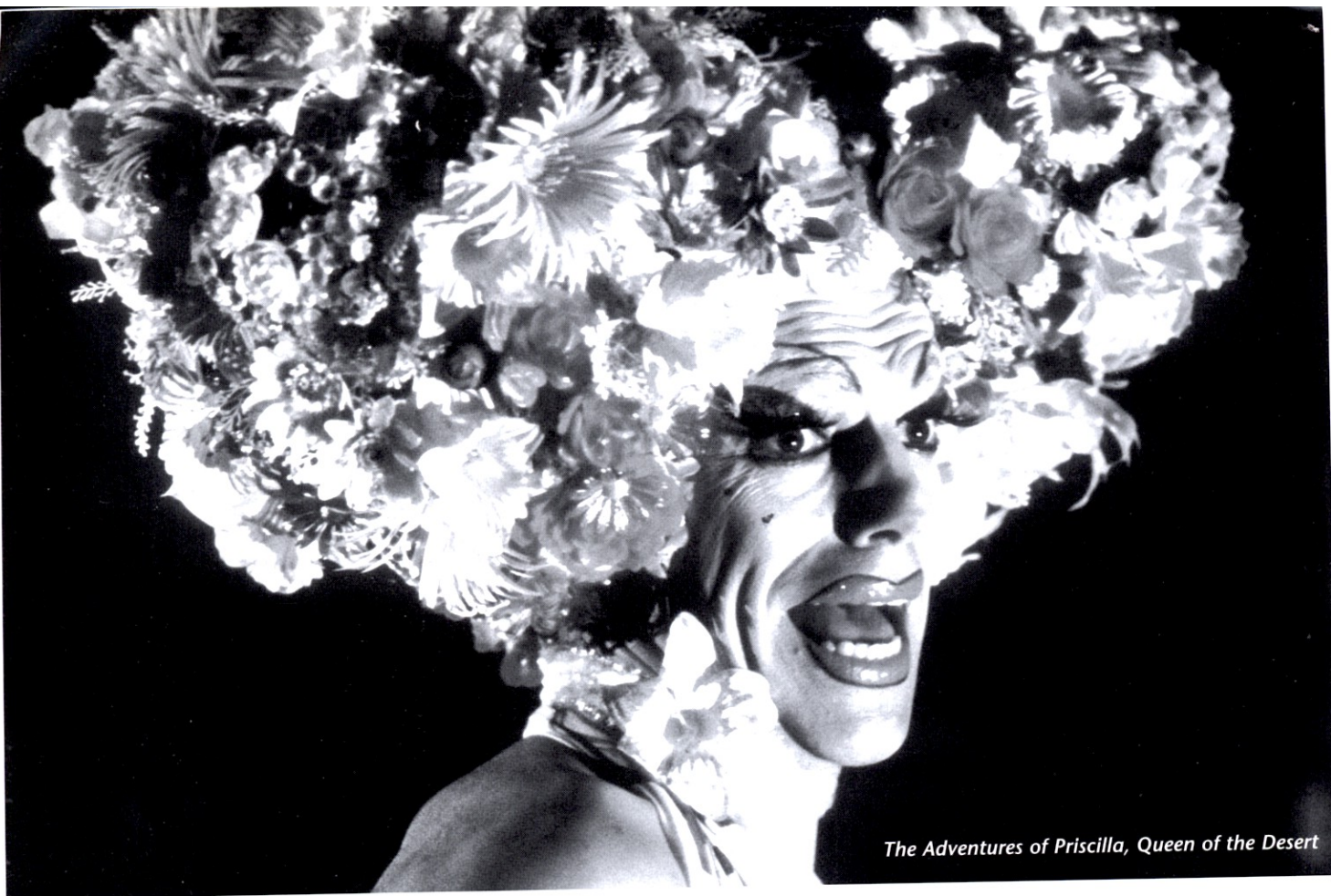
*The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*

sexuality? How do our convictions about gender reflect and sustain other convictions and even world views? What is natural? What is normal? What are our limits? Our personal borders?

And what does it mean to switch from one gender to another? Is transsexualism a matter of correcting a genetic error when a person is—as many characters in these films insist—born into the wrong body? Drawing inevitable comparisons to racial and ethnic minorities, transsexualism asks us to consider what it means to attempt to "pass." In some films transsexual characters try to blend in with the majority culture. In others, the character's purpose is precisely not to pass, but rather to remain on stage in a perpetual performance.

It's not surprising that transsexualism became a subject in films long before it had a name or a place in the cultural dialogue. Movies are the vanguard. They nudge into the open what is mumbling around in the cultural underbrush. They are the artifacts of our attitudes, fears, and preoccupations. Movies with transsexual characters not only provide a documentary history of changing attitudes toward transsexualism, but also illuminate a gradual shift toward less polarized, more inclusive thinking about gender and sexuality in general. It's no coincidence that such movies as *Transamerica* and the HBO drama, *Normal* (2003), which features a seemingly ordinary family coming to grips with its husband/father's desire for sex-reassignment surgery—films that offer relatively complex and realistic transsexual characters—appeared at a time when Western cultures were moving toward a more complex understanding of gender and sexuality. Yet, despite their progression toward empathy and realism, cinematic portrayals of transsexuality, even most recent examples, do more to depict the fear and hatred surrounding gender transgression than to cast doubt on mainstream clarities and interrogate the binary gender system.

Although many aspects of transsexualism remain controversial, and knowledge is still at a developmental stage, this is changing rapidly. Most current thinking has shifted from a genital and upbringing theory of gender identity to a neurobiological developmental theory. According to gender-reassignment surgeon Dr. Sherman Leis, many gender specialists now consider transsexualiam essentially a mind/body conflict and maintain that it's possible for some people to have gender identities inconsistent with their sex-linked genes. Thus, as many of these individuals—both real and celluloid—insist, a transsexual is literally, physically, a gendered consciousness trapped in a body of the opposite sex. Since such children display no physical abnormalities, they will be raised in the wrong gender for their mental/emotional sex, causing them profound mental anguish as they grow up.[1] Anglo-Welsh travel writer Jan Morris—who lived the first half of her life as James, underwent sex-reassignment surgery, and has lived for the past forty-five years as a woman—insists that "Transsexuality in its classic sense," is never a choice. "It is not a sexual mode or preference. It is not an act of sex at all. It is a passionate, lifelong, ineradicable conviction, and no true transsexual has ever been disabused of it."[2]

Delving into a subject as rich and evocative as transsexualism is like planting a seed that shoots out taproots in many directions. A seemingly stable theme becomes fluid, constructed, unstable. In most of the more recent films focused on transsexuality, backdrop images that situate the story within a larger cultural context embody this complicating process at work in the filmmaker's mind. In an early scene from *Transamerica*, the transsexual character Bree straightens a

*Transamerica*

framed photo of three people standing before a cluster of grass huts. The image freezes for a moment, and we see that the group consists of a white man dressed in a broad-brimmed colonial-style hat and safari suit, flanked by two black women, their necks elongated by coiled brass necklaces. *The Crying Game* (1992) begins with a black man and a white woman walking by a bridge. Images of security bars, glass walls, masks, and human skin underscore the border transgression theme in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) is interspliced with images of the Berlin Wall and with cartoons of spheres dividing like amoebas and reconnecting, to evoke Plato's parable of an original unisex being. A narrative of transsexualism inevitably becomes—directly or indirectly—a story about other boundaries and taboos, and ultimately about the fundamental binary construction of Western thought. Whether exploring or exploiting transsexualism, whether reaffirming or questioning fundamental assumptions about gender identity, each of the films I now turn to taps into anxieties surrounding sex and gender, but also evokes broader themes and renders cultural commentary.

Before the nineties, when such feature films as *The Crying Game* and *All About My Mother* (1999) overtly challenged traditional views on gender and sexuality, depictions of transsexualism in film were primarily containment narratives, serving to ease audience anxiety about fluid gender categories by reaffirming the traditional boundaries. If films flush out new ideas lurking in the cultural underbrush, they also reveal what we're stuck on: they provide a mechanism for working out acceptable explanations for the inexplicable. Celluloid transsexual characters tend to fit into predictable and reductive categories and can be defined in response to one or more of the following questions: Does the character embody human suffering or function as a social joke? Is the transgender figure a compassionate dispenser of wisdom or a lonely freak, a person of frustrated sexual identity or a dangerous killer? Most of these films, by depicting the consequences of crossing borders, reassure audiences that reliable boundaries persist, that there is a "normal," outside of which lies *terra incognita*.

Transvestism has a long history in film, reaching back to the silent era and consisting largely of drag representations that reinforced conventional notions of gender. Transsexual characters, who began appearing in movies only in the early fifties, were more troublesome. They were freaks in a clinical sense. They resisted reform. They forced us to confront their murky sexuality, challenging our most essential polarities. Not surprisingly, films offered up reassuring stereotypical explanations for the unsettling reality, confining transsexuals to roles as freaks and jokes.

The first celluloid glimpses of transsexualism came soon after news of George/Christine Jorgensen's 1952 sex-change surgery had jolted and mesmerized the world in movie theatre newsreels, and in attention-grabbing newspaper headlines such as "Thousands in US Don't Know Their True Sex!"[3] The following year, Ed Wood, a quirky filmmaker who was once declared "The World's Worst Director," attempted to capitalize on the story. Wood's *Glen or Glenda (I Changed My Sex)* (1953) combines two narratives, one about a transvestite, the other about a transsexual. Bela Lugosi, playing an ominous figure reminiscent of the Dracula character he made famous, pops up between scenes delivering screwball pleas for tolerance: "What are little boys made of? Is it puppy dog tails? Big fat snails? Or maybe brassieres!"[4]

The filming of *Glen or Glenda* is recorded in a 1994 biography,

*Ed Wood*, directed by Tim Burton. The biography describes a transsexual character, Bunny Breckenridge, who's played for laughs by Bill Murray and conforms to the cinematic convention of the transsexual as joke, a sleazy, decades-long parade that includes Bunny's namesake, *Myra Breckenridge* (1970). Based on the Gore Vidal novel, the film features Raquel Welch's curvaceous, sadistic "tranny," Myra/Myron, who relocates to Hollywood to demolish The American Male by using men in the same ways men typically use women. "Breckenridge" has been called one of the worst movies of all time, an honor conveyed in part, writes Marjorie Garber, because, "The existence of trans people strikes terror into the heart of our puritanical Eurocentric culture."[5] Other parodies from the Seventies were too farcical to be threatening. In John Water's *Desperate Living* (1977), female-to-male transsexual Mole McHenry kidnaps a surgeon, demands a sex change, and reappears with a salami-like appendage that she hopes will please her ditzy, blonde girlfriend. When it is rejected, Mole cuts off the penis and feeds it to a German shepherd.

Films have also exorcised potentially unnerving realities by isolating transsexuals and presenting them as lonely freaks. Such caricatures, while providing humor and distance, have sometimes been poignantly drawn, as was the case with the aging transsexual showgirl Bernadette, played by a mournful-faced Terrance Stamp in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994). Bernadette crosses the Australian desert with two transvestite companions for whom she functions as a mother/father surrogate. The contrast between transsexual Bernadette and the younger, flashier transvestites is worth noting. Whereas the transvestites' celluloid progenitors include rascally cross-dressers in slapstick films, such as Charlie Chaplin's *The Perfect Lady* (1915) and Billy Wilder's *Some Like it Hot* (1959), there's a somberness to Bernadette that also infuses other transsexual characters from the tragicomic Roberta in *The World According to Garp* (1982) to the melancholy Joanne in Robert Altman's *Come Back to the Five and Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982). In these films, the lonely transsexual becomes a magnet for other lonely people, giving rise to the convention of male-to-female transsexual as mother confessor, a role perhaps most highly refined by the character of Mrs. Madrigal who presides over a gallery of San Francisco bohemians in the television miniseries *Tales of the City* (1993, 1997, 2001), based on the novels of Armistad Maupin. Like Bernadette in "Priscilla," Mrs. Madrigal is sadder but wiser than the assorted misfits who gather around her. In her 1974 memoir, *Conundrum*, Jan Morris speaks of her privileged role as one who has viewed the world through the lenses of both sexes. She invokes the Classical archetypes of Tiresias, the bi-gendered sage, and Minerva, Greek goddess of wisdom whose symbol, the owl, can turn its neck 180 degrees and see in all directions.[6] A female-to-male transsexual character in *Transamerica* expresses the same idea. "I've been a man and I've been a woman," he announces, "and I know more things than you single-sex people can even imagine."[7] Similarly, in "Priscilla," Bernadette is depicted as having traveled farther than have her two transvestite companions, but here the emphasis is on following a path of no return since gender-reassignment surgery has also involved severing ties to families and former lives. As Bernadette confides: "My parents never spoke to me again after I had the chop."[8]

Films dealing with male-to-female transsexuals have also raised the question of what happens to the person who is denied "the chop." According to thrillers from the low-budget horror film *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* (1971) to the Oscar-winning *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), that individual becomes a psychopathic killer. *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* stars a male-to-female transsexual lunatic in Victorian London who extracts hormones from freshly slaughtered women. *Dressed to Kill* (1980) features Michael Caine as mad psychiatrist Dr. Elliot, denied surgery and locked in a life-or-death struggle with the female trapped inside him. When a woman arouses the doctor, his female alter-ego slashes her to death with a razor. This character prefigures Buffalo Bill, the serial killer in *Silence of the Lambs*. Also denied sex-change surgery, "Billy" settles for stitching together "a woman suit" from the skins of size 14 women. "Silence," a complex parable of unstable, inverted and mixed-up borders, moves beyond the containment narratives typical of its cinematic progenitors, where the gender transgressor is hunted down and purged. Hannibal Lecter, the cannibal psychiatrist, not only invades people's heads. He also eats people. Now imprisoned, Lecter enacts his perverse fantasies through walls and bars and cages, with Billy, his former psychiatric patient, as his Mr. Hyde-like agent. The film declares its anxieties about transsexualism in surprisingly overt ways, writes Judith Halberstam. She views the skin of Billy's female victims, in which he clothes himself, as a metaphor for the outward appearance that traditionally signifies gender, explaining that Billy literally rips apart the "heterosexual construction of human, natural, the interiority of gender."[9] The mission of Jodie Foster's FBI agent, who hunts down the killer, is to reestablish traditional boundaries and restore the social order.

Suicide is the cinematic fate of choice for the male–to–female transsexual who doesn't become a psychopathic killer. *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), in which Al Pacino tries to rob a bank to finance his male wife's sex change operation, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *In a Year of 13 Moons* (1978) feature transsexual characters whose suicides amount to self-performed exorcisms of a dangerous social aberration. Like *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, *In a Year of 13 Moons* characterizes the post-surgical transsexual character as having traversed a one-way bridge, but in Fassbinder's film, the tragedy is deepened by the admission that surgery was a blunder. This relentlessly pessimistic film, which evokes the ongoing suppression of difference in Fassbinder's post-war Germany, chronicles the life of Elvira Weishaupt, born Erwin. Despite having undergone a sex change to please her lover, Elvira was again rejected. Now she wanders through the slaughterhouse where Erwin once worked, recounting her history while surrounded by meat-hooked carcasses whose blood rains onto the floor. Eventually, Elvira participates in the purgation of the abnormal in Post-Nazi Germany when she commits suicide.

*In a Year of 13 Moons* is one of the grimmest movies imaginable, perhaps because the tragedy, in this instance, derives from the filmmaker's personal experience. Fassbinder directed this film shortly after his male lover had committed suicide. The filmmaker uses the torment of a transsexual character not only to stand for the kinds of horrors that had been perpetrated in Nazi Germany, but also as a metaphor for his own loss and possibly for his guilt. Fatalism suffuses the film. Elvira can't change back into a man and laments the surgery; Fassbinder can't recover his lover. Here, transsexualism is used as a metaphor for intolerance, loss, and an irreversible fatal decision.

*The Crying Game*

Unlike the dramas of Fassbinder and others, in which matters such as essentialism and intolerance arise from almost clinical narratives of transsexualism, *The Crying Game*, filmed in the early nineties when challenges to traditional views on sexuality were becoming more public, makes use of more persuasively complicated characters to set up the metaphor, and folds the tale of transsexualism into other kinds of stories in order to address broader questions about gender, racial, religious and political identities. A carnival scene by a bridge at the film's beginning evokes its preoccupation with borders and crossings. When Jody, an English soldier serving in Ireland, is captured at the carnival and held hostage by IRA terrorists, he remarks on the irony of his position as a black man representing a racist country. Before he is killed, Jody petitions one of his captors, Fergus, to look after his girlfriend. Deserting the IRA, Fergus crosses political, racial and gender borders to fall in love with Jody's girl, Dil, a stunning, light-skinned black woman who turns out to be anatomically male. Dil "fools" not only heterosexual Fergus but the audience as well. She appears to be a blend of races and genders; her presence confuses and questions all political, racial, and gender identities in the film.

Although *The Crying Game* is, among other things, a plea for tolerance, at the time of its release, its message was somewhat eclipsed by audience reaction to the infamous scene where Fergus discovers Dil's penis, runs to the bathroom and vomits. A public whispering campaign urged people not to give up the movie's secret. But, according to Kate Bornstein, "'Don't say a word' means more than just "don't spoil the

movie." The message also reflects what some critics have tagged "transsexual panic" or, as Bornstein puts it, "How the gender defenders of this culture would like to see transgendered people: as a secret, hidden away in some closet."[10]

*Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), though preoccupied with the chop, also draws together most of transsexualism's cinematic themes and metaphors. The film portrays Hedwig, "a slip of a girlyboy" from communist East Berlin, who becomes the victim of a botched surgery that leaves her a freak with an inch-long stump, as simultaneously a joke, a tragic figure, and an occasion for metaphor and social critique. Born in Berlin when it was divided by the Wall, Hansel, a young white man, crosses multiple borders when he undergoes the incomplete surgery and, as Hedwig, marries a black American soldier and moves to a trailer park in Kansas. Abandoned by her husband, Hedwig forms a rock band and becomes mentor and lover to a young musician, Tommy Gnossis. Tommy's name, with its allusion to wisdom, signals that Hedwig has embarked on a journey of enlightenment and that we've entered the land of metaphor. Tommy eventually steals Hedwig's songs and abandons her when he discovers her mutilated condition.

Surrounded by her loyal band of misfits, for whom she serves as a Mrs. Madrigal or Bernadette-like den mother, Hedwig belts out her tragic tale to uncomprehending customers in restaurant salad bars. The "straight" audience as naïve or judgmental participant in the story is a trope that weaves through a number of transgender-themed films from non-straight directors, including Ed Wood, the cross-dressing

director of *Glen or Glenda* and "Hedwig" director John Cameron Mitchell, who is gay. This portrayal of the naïve audience is a wink, no doubt, to those in the know, but also a reminder of the spectator's implication in the transsexual character's problems. *Glen or Glenda* included a chorus of scoffers representing small-minded Americans, saying things like, "If man was supposed to fly, God would have given him wings"[11] In "Hedwig," the salad bar customers evoke the popular audience in the dark theater who might be viewing the movie purely as a freak show and missing its tolerance theme.

"Hedwig" is heavy-handed, though more campy than preachy, and like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), it has accumulated a cult following. Spliced into the tragicomedy-musical are images of walls and brutality, including flashes of Hedwig's traumatic childhood in Berlin. Throughout the film, cartoon graphics of spheres dividing and realigning allude to the classical Platonic tale of an original unisex progenitor, and recreate transsexualism as a metaphor for peace, unity, and brother/sisterhood. Split in two, the broken halves of the cartoon spheres perpetually search for each other, just as Hedwig searches for her other half in the form of a lover. "What about sex?" Hedwig inquires. "Is that how we put ourselves back together?"[12] Hedwig's question evokes not only the unifying energy of the sexual act, but also the blurring of gender polarities in the movie's transsexual theme.

By the end of the film, Hedwig learns that she will eventually find her other half, though not in the way she expected, in the person of a lover. She must look within herself to become complete. Reversing Plato's parable, borders will melt away. Male and female will again become one.

Transsexualism insists that gender is not black-and-white. Rather, it involves an entire spectrum of grays that we're only beginning to acknowledge in Western cultures, and we're acknowledging it first in the movies. Pedro Almadovar's *All About my Mother* (2002) offers up a celluloid feast of gender identities, supplanting the male/female dichotomy with a concept of continuity. Characters include a lesbian, a transvestite, a transsexual, and a heterosexual living together in harmony. Unlike the films in which transsexualism is used to explore varieties of intolerance, *All About My Mother* is a study of female community and tolerance.

The enterprise of several post-millennium movies, including *All About My Mother*, has been to move beyond the chop and to convert transsexualism into a metaphor for the human condition, presenting characters engaged in the universal human quest for wholeness, self-realization, and understanding. The earlier stories were of people on their own, bereft of family and relationships. The HBO movie, *Normal* (2003) features, as the title suggests, a seemingly ordinary family facing the late-life revelation that the husband/father has always experienced himself as a woman and now seeks his stunned wife's blessing as he contemplates sex-reassignment surgery. As the story unfolds, this film explores transsexualism within a mainstream context. In this regard, *Normal* proclaims that what has been for decades a rivulet off the mainstream is in actuality a major tributary. Human beings inhabit a spectrum of gender identities.

Echoing this message, a transsexual character in *Transamerica* (2005) notes, "We walk among you," while the film also implies that, "We defy categorization." Fittingly, for a narrative about transsexualism, *Transamerica* crosses genre borders, combining elements of fantasy and documentary,

comedy and tragedy. Its heroine, too, continually subverts expectations and defies classification. Bree is simultaneously an extravagant parody and a vulnerable, sympathetic human being who stands almost alone among these films as a non-threatening cinematic transsexual. Unlike the flamboyant Bernadette in "Priscilla," Bree is stuffy, conservative, and dresses like a librarian. Far from exhibiting the socially defiant attitude of Hedwig, Bree is indecisive and overwhelmed by conflicting social messages. Prudish and naive, she's shocked by her son's drug use and by his sexually abusive stepfather. The result of these continual reversals is to complicate Bree's character, drawing the audience into the problems of a flesh-and-blood transsexual trying to survive in contemporary America.

Underscoring this humanizing process and linking transsexualism to broader themes are the film's background images. Photographic scenes from Colonial Africa, juxtaposed photos of white American and black African beauty ideals, and glimpses of unassimilated Mexican immigrants evoke the binary thinking from which Bree's problems flow. Meanwhile, Zulu, Inca, and American Country Western music on the movie's soundtrack, pulses against the forces of cultural, racial, and gender partition and argues for more inclusive thinking.

Reductive and literal readings of transsexualism have generated decades of films preoccupied with "the chop," and most of the recent examples still do a better job of tapping into fears and depicting cultural anxieties than of challenging the binary gender system. Still, if films like *Normal* and *Transamerica* are an indication of the future, transsexual characters will no longer be treated exclusively as jokes or shock devices. Evolving attitudes toward gender and sexuality are bubbling to the surface and breaking through in the movies, where transsexualism is slowly being recognized as a subject abundant in human and symbolic complexity.

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4   *Glen or Glenda (I Changed My Sex).* Dir. Edward B. Wood. Perf. Bela Lugosi, Lyle Talbot, Timothy Farrell. 1953. Screen Classics, Inc.
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7   *Transamerica.* Dir. Duncan Tucker. Perf. Felicity Huffman, Kevin Zegers, Fionnula Flanagan. 2005. Belladonna Productions.
8   *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert.* Dir. Stephan Elliot. Perf. Hugo Weaving, Guy Pearce, Terance Stamp. 1994, Back Row Productions.
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# Torture Porn
## and Bodies Politic

POST-COLD WAR AMERICAN
PERSPECTIVES IN ELI ROTH'S
*HOSTEL* AND *HOSTEL: PART II*

JEROD RA'DEL HOLLYFIELD

During the press tour for his directorial debut, *Cabin Fever* (2003), American horror filmmaker Eli Roth compared his $1.5 million independent film to the 1980s American horror films of his youth: "By the end of the decade, horror had literally become a joke. The term I often use to describe this effect is 'gore-porno,' where the true impact of horror is drained away and the motive for these movies becomes just a way of fast-forwarding from one death to the next."[1] While Roth discussed his views of "gore-porno" before *Cabin Fever* earned $34.5 million internationally and propelled himself and his distributor, Lions Gate Films, to the forefront of American horror film production, he would see his criticisms of films that depict violent content in a pornographic manner used to describe not only his own work, but also the entire wave of 21st century horror of which he was a part. When Roth's second film, *Hostel,* earned more than $20 million its opening weekend and unseated *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* (2005) as the top-grossing movie in America during the first weekend of 2006, Roth became a scapegoat for declining American social mores in articles published by several prominent media outlets. An amalgamation of teenage sex comedy and violent exploitation film, *Hostel* follows two American backpackers and their Icelandic friend as their Eurotrip for sex and drugs turns violent when they become victims of a Slovakian hostel owned by Elite Hunting, a club that sells travelers to international clients who pay to live out their murderous fantasies without legal repercussions. Though the film met with the negative reaction that many critics reserve for horror films, *Hostel*'s reception was atypically scathing. Reviewing *Hostel* for *The Village Voice*, Mark Holcomb writes, "The film is too casually misanthropic and enamored of its expulsive prosthetic virtuosity to be politically relevant, and it's not clear what response—shame? outrage? titillation?—Roth is after."[2] In an even more venomous review for *The New York Times*, Nathan Lee writes, "The calculated outrages of Eli Roth's brutal exploitation film prove less shocking than its relentless bigotry."[3]

As a result of a virulent critical reception that contrasted sharply with its box-office and home-video performance, *Hostel* transcended the opening-weekend lifespan of most horror movies, becoming the film indicative of the increasingly graphic violence of the horror genre in post-9/11 America.[4] While *Time* branded Roth a charter

*Hostel*

member of "The Splat Pack" in an article discussing the success of *Hostel* and other ultraviolent horror films, including James Wan's *Saw* (2004), Rob Zombie's *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), and Alexandre Aja's remake of Wes Craven's 1977 cannibal film *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), Roth's most enduring label would come from a cautiously positive review of his film.[5] In the 2006 *New York Magazine* article "Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn," film critic David Edelstein coined the term "torture porn" to categorize the aforementioned films within the history of the genre. As Edelstein writes, "Torture movies cut deeper than mere gory spectacle. Unlike the old seventies and eighties hack-'em-ups (or their jokey remakes, like *Scream*), in which masked maniacs punished nubile teens for promiscuity (the spurt of blood was equivalent to the money shot in porn), the victims here are neither interchangeable nor expendable."[6] Writing in response to *Hostel*'s box-office success the previous month, Edelstein praised Roth for his depiction of "the mixture of innocence and entitlement in young American males abroad."[7] However, despite Edelstein's positive comments about *Hostel*, several media critics distorted Edelstein's definition of torture porn and turned it into a pejorative buzzword.

In the year and a half between the release of *Hostel* and its sequel *Hostel: Part II* (2007)—a continuation of the first film that substitutes female protagonists for the original's male leads and includes the perspectives of two of the hostel's clients—torture porn became the epithet du jour for the subgenre of horror Roth helped create. *Hostel: Part II* met with a similar ire as its predecessor as evidenced in reviews such as David Poland's assessment of the film as, "The most disgusting, degrading, misogynistic, soulless s*** I have ever seen in a movie that is going to be released widely in this country."[8] However, many reviews from prominent publications such as *The Chicago Tribune*, *USA Today*, *The London Times*, and *The San Francisco Chronicle* simply relied on the torture porn moniker to dismiss the film.[9] Treating *Hostel: Part II* as anything more than torture porn may pander—in the words of Nathan Lee—to

"the bamboozled pseudo-intellectuals who laughably defended *Hostel* as a geopolitical critique of American arrogance and the culture of torture."[10] Yet, applying "torture porn" as a way to summarize the work of a filmmaker who stated to the BBC his intentions to make films with "the pessimistic point of view of not trusting the government" and "the dark cynicism that came out in films like *Last House on the Left* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*," appears to neglect both the complexities of Roth's work and the contemporary horror film's potential as a cultural document that navigates the tensions between American nationalism in the "War on Terror" era and the globalized world in a similar manner as Roth's horror filmmaking predecessors dealt with Vietnam.[11]

To fully comprehend the "torture porn" label that has defined critical reception of Roth's work, one must take into account the complex web of interactions between torture and civilization that marked the foundation of Western culture. In her analysis of torture's role in Ancient Greece, Page duBois acknowledges that torture has served a prominent role in a multitude of societies throughout history. However, as duBois writes:

> **I also refuse to adopt the moral stance of those who pretend that torture is the work of "others," that it belongs to the third world, that we can condemn it from afar. To stand thus is to eradicate history, to participate both in the exportation of torture as a product of Western civilization, and in the concealment of its ancient and perhaps necessary coexistence with much that we hold dear.**[12]

In her advocacy of understanding torture's influence on contemporary Western society, duBois highlights an internal conflict within the very definition of torture porn. Rather than place films deemed torture porn in dialogue with current events, the moniker attempts to isolate the subgenre and



*Hostel*

endow it with a sense of otherness that works outside the confines of socially acceptable and responsible culture, a positioning that allows critics to dismiss its meaning and separate it from the production of the American cultural metanarrative.

Through this semantic tension between critical opinion and artistic intent apparent in the reaction to the *Hostel* franchise, a battle over the power of cultural control emerges that echoes the analysis of torture, discipline, and punishment undertaken by Michel Foucault. As Foucault writes:

> Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power, it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by the social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies.[13]

In his depiction of the cycle of torture for sale as a commodity on the globalized market, Roth dramatizes Foucault's idea that power cannot be fixed in centralized governments or individuals, insisting on a definition of power in which signs such as torture devices and tattoos indicate power's endless movement through a circuitry that defies boundaries of class, gender, and even nations. Roth's decentralized presentation of power is even more applicable in the era of globalization that, according to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, has witnessed a shift from an imperialism based on national sovereignty to an Empire now governed by the circulation of power among multinational corporate entities that appear to act as "a unitary power that maintains the social peace and produces its ethical truths."[14] In engaging with this host of circulating power dynamics, Roth directly addresses America's power within the framework of the contemporary globalized world: the power of American capitalism's influence on former Soviet-block countries in the postwar era, the power of the male gaze interacting with the female body both onscreen and in audience reaction, the power of torture imagery in a climate marked by discourse on torture, the power of the critic employed by a multinational media corporation to culturally situate a film. Using images of bodily torture, Roth forces his audience to question its own positionality and acquisition of knowledge in a society where visual mass media images serve as primary communication tools to instruct and circulate power.

In this essay, I argue that rather than act simply as torture porn, Roth's *Hostel* and *Hostel: Part II* employ the conventions of the horror genre to comment not only on the lingering effects of Cold-War era American nationalism after the fall of the Soviet Union but also on the commodification of the human body in a post-Cold War economy marked by globalized trade. Throughout both films, Roth depicts Slovakia as a nation struggling to locate itself within the global economy as a result of the tensions between its past associations with the U.S.S.R. and its current status as an independent republic. However, Roth's depictions of Slovakia occur primarily through the interactions of his American characters with Slovakian natives, a choice that allows Roth to criticize the narrow scope of American nationalism in an international context. As the films' American protagonists become commodities that the hostel sells on the global market, Roth creates an amalgamation of capitalism and bodily atrocities that forces his audience to question both America's and its own role in the film's exhibition of capitalistic violence.

## The Spectrality of Slovakian Identity and the Ugly American

In her analysis of American horror cinema, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, Carol Clover writes of the urbanoia film, a horror subgenre that features a move from the metropolitan and suburban codes of law into the realm of the unmediated country. As Clover states, "Going from the city to the country in the horror film is in any case very much like going from village to deep, dark forest in traditional fairy tales."[15] While critics such as Lee place the *Hostel* films firmly in the urbanoia tradition, the narrative world Roth creates demonstrates several pronounced deviations from Clover and Lee's use of the term.[16] The protagonists of the *Hostel* films do not simply travel from metropolitan space to a lawless countryside liberated by its isolation. Rather, they travel from American suburbs—as a result of their economic mobility—to a foreign nation with a complex hierarchy of laws and regulations forged from the interactions of the fallen Soviet state and the globalized market economy. In a similar manner to the treatment of rural Texas in Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) or the American Southwestern desert in the original *The Hills Have Eyes*, Roth's depiction of Slovakia in the franchise eschews realistic details in favor of atmosphere. Yet, the lack of verisimilitude that some critics perceive as bigotry allows Roth to criticize the xenophobia and nationalism of his films' protagonists, leaving them to survive in a foreign world informed only by the American capitalist ideology responsible in part for the tumultuous history of Slovakia.

Equipped with this seemingly superficial view of Slovakia's history and culture, Roth also uses the film's historical survey of torture methods to position the nation in a way that echoes Hardt and Negri's analysis of Empire's appropriation of national history: "Empire exhausts historical time, suspends history, and summons the past and future within its own ethical order. In other words, Empire presents its order as permanent, eternal, and necessary."[17] As a result, while Roth may appear to eschew an accurate portrayal of present-day Slovakia, he presents a portrait of a nation whose history is in service to a globalized economy that absorbs national legacies into its own order. Though the rudiments of present-day Slovakia began after the Velvet Revolution that overthrew communist rule in 1989, the country experienced a cycle of dependence on dominant European political ideologies throughout the 20th century.[18] Governed by the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, Slovakia was part of a single Czechoslovak state from 1918 until Hitler's Germany declared it an independent nation for the political purposes of the Nazi regime.[19] Under the Nazi regime, Slovakia fervently adopted Nazi policies, becoming an active participant in Jewish genocide and even adopting stricter anti-Jewish laws than those of the Germans.[20] After becoming a Soviet-block nation at the end of World War II, Slovakia did not begin to cement its post-Cold War national identity until its

first parliamentary elections in 1998 and presidential election in 1999. As Grigorij Meseznikov writes of the identity crises former Soviet-block countries have faced since the end of the Cold War: "During the brief period of the post-communist transition, the internal character of political parties and movements—especially the development of an ideological profile—has played a significant role in the general process of societal transformation."[22] However, despite the cogent identity Slovakia fostered at the end of the 20th century, the nation now faces the conquering ideology of globalized corporate Empire in direct opposition to its former fascist and communist ties. Forced to forge its national identity while contending with the encroachment of the Empire of global capitalism, Slovakia embodies a nation steeped in both the past and present as it attempts to navigate its future.

In his discussion of the state of Marxism after the fall of the Soviet Union, Jacques Derrida also makes claims concerning suspended history's relation to contemporary politics that can be applied to Roth's depiction of Slovakia. Characterizing Marxist ideology in terms of spectrality and hauntology that collapse the past, present, and future without distinction, Derrida writes:

> **The ghostly would displace itself like the movement of this history. Haunting would mark the very existence of Europe. It would open the space and the relation to self of what is called by this name, at least since the Middle Ages. The experience of the specter, that is how Marx, along with Engels, will have also thought, described, or diagnosed a certain dramaturgy of modern Europe, notably that of its great unifying projects.[23]**

For Derrida, Marxist ideology continues to haunt Europe's response to the economic problems that have plagued and continue to plague the continent, leaving him to caution that the supposed victory of capitalism over communism does little to address the ethical dilemmas and continued quests for power that have defined European politics. Derrida's claims have particular significance for nations such as Slovakia as they forego communist ideology for active participation in globalized capitalism.[24] In positioning Slovakia as the location for his profit-motivated palimpsest of torture, Roth addresses the fragmented identity of a nation haunted by Marxist ideology while situating itself within the globalized economy.

Reflecting both Hardt and Negri's view of Empire's suspension of time and Derrida's ideas of spectrality, Roth presents Slovakia as a nation that collects the violent precipitates of Europe's great unifying projects without regard for time or history. Within this timeless construction of Slovakia, Roth positions Elite Hunting's torture compound as an echo of the nation's violence that has endured despite constant political shifts. Upon entering Slovakia in *Hostel*, American tourists and future Elite Hunting victims Paxton (Jay Hernandez) and Josh (Derek Richardson) gaze at the working smokestack of an enormous factory facility from the window of their cab. Later in the film when Elite Hunting siren Natalya (Barbara Nedeljakova) lures Paxton to the facility while he searches for the missing Josh, Paxton learns that the building is not a factory, but the front for Elite Hunting's labyrinth of torture rooms where clients pay to kill. As a group of Elite Hunting employees drags

Paxton to his torture chamber, Roth integrates a series of subjective shots of the torture rooms, revealing Elite Hunting's clients torturing victims in various manners: dissection with medical tools, laceration with a medieval dagger, drawing and quartering, castration, and whipping. With Paxton bound in his torture room, Roth cuts to a large table featuring a variety of torture weapons, including an army-issue pistol, a spiked bat, chainsaws, and power tools. Through depicting the variety of torture available to clients, Roth constructs a culture of torture that places methods from various historical periods on equal terms within Elite Hunting's market of death, referencing forms of torture from the Middle Ages to Nazi medical experiments and contemporary military executions. Yet, the film's depictions of torture go far beyond violent pastiche, exemplifying a timeless quality as commodities on the global market that curtail ethical progress, a fact Roth underscores when upon Paxton's escape, the film reveals that the building's smokestack is actually part of a crematorium similar to those used during the period the Nazis controlled Slovakia.

Roth further accents the suspended history of his depiction of Slovakia through his presentation of the nation's tourism industry. While searching for Oli (Eythor Gudjonsson), Paxton and Josh follow a man wearing Oli's jacket into a "Museum Tortury." After the attendant tears their tickets using a miniature guillotine, Roth tracks Paxton and Josh through the museum's history-of-torture tour featuring the same tools and weapons that Elite Hunting's clients use in the film. Similarly, much of *Hostel: Part II*'s exposition occurs at a harvest festival that features residents wearing executioners' robes, bonfires that resemble funeral pyres, and puppet shows reenacting torture with axes. During the film's climax, Roth cuts to a holding chamber inside Elite Hunting's compound as rows of torture victims await processing, a scene that ties the earlier harvest imagery with the human harvest integral to Elite Hunting's global economic prowess. Through binding past images of torture and harvest with Elite Hunting's torture-for-profit sensibilities, Roth equalizes the cultures of violence from the past and present, exhibiting a depravity that has endured numerous shifts in political ideology.

Yet, Roth extends his discussion of enduring cultures of violence past his spectral presentation of Slovakia, exposing the inherent naiveté of American hegemony through the actions of his American characters. As a result, Roth's presentation of Slovakia's timeless violence works in dialogue with the dominance of American culture in the global market, creating an atmosphere that disturbs the relationship between the two nations. In constructing the first act of *Hostel* as a teen sex comedy, Roth demonstrates the hubris and brazen consumerism of American culture responsible for Paxton and Josh's status as postgraduate, Eurotripping hedonists. When Josh expresses his reticence to stay in Slovakia after Oli's disappearance, Paxton responds by saying: "When I'm studying for the bar, and you're writing your thesis, this is the shit we're going to think about." When the two encounter resistance on the trip, such as a bouncer throwing them out of a bar after a fight, they respond by saying, "I'm an American. I've got rights." For Paxton and Josh, the Eurotrip acts as a rite of passage not meant to increase cultural awareness or highlight the differences between America and the rest of the world. Instead, the trip is merely another commodity, the last bastion of freedom for two young men before becoming imbued within an

increasingly globalized American economy like the parents who funded their excursion.

Though more sympathetic and polite than their male counterparts, the female protagonists of *Hostel: Part II* exhibit similar senses of entitlement. Roth introduces Beth (Lauren German), Whitney (Bijou Phillips), and Lorna (Heather Matarazzo) at an outdoor art class in Rome during a semester abroad. Deciding to spend the weekend in Prague on a whim, Beth—the heir to a multimillion-dollar fortune—calls her father to tell him not to reserve a room at the Four Seasons for her and her friends because "college kids don't stay at the Four Seasons." While Roth clearly establishes Beth as the only one of the girls outside of the American middle class in the film, he still primarily characterizes the other girls through their allegiance to commodity: Whitney asks a male train passenger to sell her ecstasy and cocaine while shrugging off the cost of the drugs while Lorna hysterically screams that her I-Pod "is everything" after it goes missing on the train. Roth establishes this importance of commodity as early as the opening title sequence that features a close-up of Lorna's purse as an Elite Hunting employee steals her cash and I-Pod before incinerating all traces of her actual identity, allowing Roth to define her solely through commodities before he even introduces her character. Unlike Paxton and Josh's search for refuge before their official induction into the American capitalist system, the girls' encounter with Europe never places their trip outside the context of the market of exchange. They are American consumers, using their economic prowess to purchase international experience, a factor that highlights the continuing relationship between American capitalism and globalized corporate Empire.

Building on his criticisms of American capitalism's hubris, Roth also constructs his characters as individuals ignorant of international affairs and cultures, a deficiency that ultimately shatters their comfort and myths of isolation. Through his focus on postgraduates and college students, Roth taps into the notions of well-rounded and diverse education fundamental to American capitalism. However, once his characters reach Europe, they not only demonstrate ignorance about international affairs but also consistently deride Slovakian culture. When Paxton and Josh discuss their quest for European girls with undercover Elite Hunting agent Alex (Lubomir Bukovy) at a hostel in Amsterdam, he shows them a series of digital photos of himself cavorting with several nude Slovakian women, ultimately convincing the boys to make the journey with a single comment: "They hear your accent, they fuck you. There's so much pussy there, and because of the war, there are no guys." Paxton and Josh do not question Alex's statement, unaware that no war has taken place in Slovakia since the 1950s. Working from their limited knowledge of Eastern and Central Europe, they seemingly conflate Slovakia with images of Kosovo and Bosnia as they exchange grins while Alex says the line that ends the scene: "You just take them." For the first time, the film deviates from its sex comedy aesthetic into an ominous moralism that alters the boys' character dynamics. No longer simply searching for just a good time, Paxton and Josh install themselves as pillagers who plan to reap the spoils of a war, unconcerned with either the ramifications of war on the country or the role of their own country in the conflict. They simply do not care, ready to honor the benefits of their American status.



While continuing to depict the females of *Hostel: Part II* far more sympathetically than their male counterparts from the first film, Roth uses their limited international scope to refine his satirical depiction of the hubris of American nationalism. When Axelle (Vera Jordanova), the daughter of Elite Hunting's CEO, convinces the girls to accompany her to a spa in Slovakia, Whitney responds: "Slovakia? Wasn't there, like, a war there?" to which Beth responds, "That was Bosnia." Later in the film as Whitney plans to have sex with Miroslav (Stanislav Ianevski) another tenant at the hostel, she asks Beth: "What do you think? Too Eastern Bloc?" Although not adopting the conqueror mentalities of Paxton and Josh, the girls still demonstrate a disregard for the culture to which they travel, opting to focus on their own motives without a thought to the world around them. Through the exhibition of his characters' ignorance, Roth distinguishes his film from Clover's ideas of urbanoia horror. His characters do not enter an impenetrable dark forest ala Little Red Riding Hood. They are under the aegis of American nationalism and willfully ignorant of the cultural world around them, a false sense of security that has deadly consequences.

In contrast to the connotations of the torture porn label, Roth's portrayals of his characters as individuals caught up in the arrogance of American nationalism and capitalism make

them far more dynamic individuals than the anonymous and undeveloped characters of pornography and violent exploitation cinema. As a result, their torture has ideological ramifications concerning America's interaction with the globalized world similar to the political uses of torture prominent in 18th and 19th century Europe. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault discusses three criteria that punishment must obey in order to be considered torture: 1). It must demonstrate a degree of pain that is "measured exactly, or at least calculated, compared and hierarchized," 2). It must show a correlation between "the quality, intensity, duration of the pain, with the gravity of the crime, the person of the criminal, the rank of his victims," 3). It must form part of a ritual that "must mark the victim."[25]

For Foucault, the idea of torture remains rooted in the laws and mediated punishment that defined the governing bodies of Europe, an example he uses to introduce his greater thesis of the ubiquitous presence of power. In the tradition of Foucault's larger project, Roth has dislodged the idea of torture from the context of European politics, demonstrating how it interacts with the circulation of power in his films. The circuitry becomes defined in the *Hostel* franchise not by the official government, but by Elite Hunting's interaction with global market forces. As Roth reveals during a close-up of a business card Paxton finds when escaping Elite Hunting's compound, the firm operates through a rigorous pricing system of victims with Americans—priced at $25,000—as the most expensive commodity. Through the combination of the film's exhibition of its characters' behavior with the revelation of Americans' high market value on the torture market, Roth asserts the demand for American torture victims as a form of punishment mediated both by Slovakian industry and—in the case of the first film—the foreign business professionals who engage in the torture of American tourists to mark them for their worldview. For Roth, the torture of the film does not act as pornography, but a glimpse into the overlooked specters that manifest when post-Cold War nationalism and the forces of the globalized market collide with American cultural perspectives.

## Gendered Power and the Body as Commodity

Though the horror film is particularly suited for Roth's discussion of torture in contemporary society, it also forces him to navigate the genre's problematic gender tensions. Critics such as Clover argue that gender depictions in horror films create a disparity in which female characters assume the role of victim and only those characters who are "masculine in dress and behavior" triumph over the traditionally male monster in the narrative.[26] As Isabel Cristina Pinedo writes: "What makes gender trouble so suitable for the horror genre is its commitment to transgressing boundaries."[27] Embracing horror's transgressive potential, Roth focuses on bodily torture as a way to comment on gender's role in organizing the power structure that governs Elite Hunting's position within the globalized economy. In the *Hostel* franchise, gender play and performance serve as the primary channels through which power circulates, reflecting Foucault's definition of power as: "The multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them."[28] Rather than accept genre convention, Roth subverts his constructions of gender in the film, calling attention to the commodification of the male and female body and its relation to the films' depiction of power.

While *Hostel*'s male protagonists place it outside of Clover's criticism, the manner in which Roth constructs his female characters as sexual objects appears problematic as evidenced by the host of critics who accused the film of misogyny upon its release. Roth commodifies the female body throughout, presenting it as a fetishized object over which Paxton and Josh assert their superiority. Numerous shots of topless and nude women catering to Paxton and Josh's every whim dominate the first act as the duo travels to brothels and bars and refers to the relative ease of exchanging sex for money in Europe, a presentation of the female body's commodification Roth continues once the boys reach Slovakia. After discovering the hostel's coed rooming policy, Paxton, Josh, and Oli enter their room to find Natalya and Svetlana (Jana Kaderabkova) preparing to visit the hostel's spa as they greet the boys: "We're going to spa. You should come." As the narrative unfolds, the women conform to stereotypes of female Europeans: they go topless in the spa as the boys fixate on their bodies, they naturally have sex with Paxton and Josh with no cajoling, they shower together in the morning, and, on the rare occasions they are dressed, wear revealing skirts and midriff-bearing tops. However, Roth does not allow his protagonists to revel in their male gaze for long. When Josh goes missing, Paxton returns to the hostel to find that the staff cleared the room under the assumption that both boys were captured. Paxton receives a key and opens the door to his new room, revealing two new female Eastern European roommates who repeat Natalya and Svetlana's earlier words—"We're going to spa. You should come"—a reiteration that resonates for Paxton and finally alerts him to his dangerous situation: the women are all employees of Elite Hunting and harness their sexuality to lure him and other victims into a trap.

Throughout the interactions between his protagonists and Elite Hunting's sirens-for-hire, Roth highlights the effectiveness of gender as a tool to shift power. As a result of their commodification of the female body, Paxton and Josh become trapped by a market force that turns their own bodies into commodities sold on the global market. The gender play with which the films engage demonstrates Judith Butler's constructions of the relationship between the subject and the law. As Butler writes: "Here the performative, the call by the law which seeks to produce a lawful subject, produces a set of consequences that exceed and compound what appears to be the disciplining intention of the law."[29] In Roth's film, the male and female characters appear to operate under the hegemonic laws and codes of gender behavior: the males demonstrate vitality and aggression while the females remain submissive. Yet, in the reiteration of their performances, the female Elite Hunting employees subvert gender, producing consequences that disrupt the behavior structure. Roth's use of performativity is twofold: the females engage in the performances that construct their gender roles while simultaneously engaging in literal performances that use constructions of gender to lure Elite Hunting's future victims. However, while such subversion allows the women to assert power over the male characters, their reiterations remain in the service of their employer, a business that itself is beholden to the forces of the globalized economy.

Roth continues to discuss power's relationship to masculinity through the transition Paxton undergoes during the film.

After his shift from hedonist to torture victim, Paxton escapes and hides in the clients' lounge of Elite Hunting's compound where he encounters an American client (Rick Hoffmann) changing into scrubs before his torture of an Asian woman. Mistaking Paxton for a fellow client, the American initiates a conversation:

> I've been all over the world. You know, I've been everywhere and the bottom line is: Pussy is pussy. You know, every strip club, every whorehouse, every...It's all the same shit. You know, I just fucked a girl two days ago and I don't even remember the color of her tits. But this...This is something you never forget, right? RIGHT?

Through the exchange, Roth makes a clear connection between the American client's past travels and Paxton's pre-torture journey, positioning Paxton as an heir to the horrific underbelly of capitalism. Stemming from the confluence of male machismo and American arrogance, the desire to commodify, if unmitigated, becomes firmly rooted in an animalistic violence that becomes traded on the market. Furthering the parallels between Paxton and Elite Hunting's clientele, Paxton escapes from the compound by stealing a suit and a trench coat from the lounge's locker room and assuming the role of a client. At the end of the film when Paxton tracks down and murders Josh's torturer in a train station bathroom, he brings to fruition the violence inherent in the combination of his masculine aggression and American dominance while seemingly acting out against the power structure.[30]

Throughout *Hostel: Part II*, Roth extends his discussion of gender play and its relationship to the circulation of power by broadening his cast of characters and the scope of the Elite Hunting organization. Roth constructs the film as a crosscut narrative following Beth, Whitney, and Lorna to Slovakia as well as their future torturers, American business executives Stuart (Roger Bart) and Todd (Richard Burgi). Yet before beginning the narrative proper, Roth exposes the futility of Paxton's escape in the previous film when Elite Hunting's agents murder Paxton at his hideout in rural America in the sequel's opening, leaving his girlfriend (Jordan Ladd) to discover his headless body at the breakfast table. With Paxton's death, Roth reestablishes the circulating dimensions of power that govern the narrative world of his films, a power that no individual or group can retain despite engagements with the sex, torture, and murder meant to create a lasting assertion of power.[31] Paxton may have acquired power, but its circulation is far greater than him, making him a casualty of the circuitry through which it travels.

Honing his criticisms of masculine aggression as a gateway to misogyny and torture that he began with Paxton's narrative in the first film, Roth depicts Todd and Stuart in vastly different manners. Todd acts as an extension of the American businessman from the first film, a bourgeois transgressor tired of sex and drugs and seeking domination via new channels, a trait Roth underscores when Todd pushes away a prostitute in the middle of intercourse after Elite Hunting pages him for his torture session. In contrast, Roth portrays Stuart as an individual so



*Hostel: Part II*

meek that the film introduces him silently clearing the breakfast table while his family ignores him. However, once the men begin their torture sessions, their roles reverse. As he tortures Whitney, Todd exhibits a lack of control with a circular saw while taunting her: "I bet that pretty face got you a lot." Rather than killing Whitney, the blade gets stuck in her hair and maims her, leaving Todd too flustered to finish his session, a scene Roth presents as a visual pun on the disparity between masculine talk and action. Stuart's reversal occurs in a much more sinister manner as he projects marital issues onto Beth while beating her, leaving her to scream: "I'm not your wife, Stuart."

Though within the narrative framework, Todd and Stuart appear as characters whose financial worth dictates some semblance of agency, their misogyny demonstrates a desire to accumulate power through the dominance of the female body that is indicative of their precarious hold on the greater circulation of power in the global economy. As they prepare for their torture sessions, Todd and Stuart undergo the process of receiving tattoos of a bloodhound—the Elite Hunting logo—as stipulated in their contracts. Though Roth executes the scene as a male bonding ritual with the bicep-flexing Todd egging on the reticent Stuart and exclaiming: "I'm fucking proud of mine," it evokes the Ancient Greek connotations between tattooing and torture. As duBois writes: "The tortured body retains scars, marks that recall the violence inflicted upon it by the torturer. In part because slaves were tattooed in the ancient world, such marks of torture resonate in the Greek mind with tattoos and other forms of metaphorical inscription..."[32] Perceiving the tattoos as emblems of masculinity that the duo hopes their torture sessions will embody, Todd and Stuart fail to realize the incongruence between the mark and reality, reflecting Foucault's claim concerning the body's involvement in the political field: "Power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs."[33] Though Whitney and Beth will become their future victims, Todd and Stuart are victims themselves, marked as subservient to greater market forces. Even as paying clients of Elite Hunting, they are not exempt from its rules. When Todd refuses to honor his contract by finishing off Whitney, Elite Hunting's staff unleash a pack of dogs that devour him. Despite his client status, Todd remains beholden to the contract, unable to glean enough power to save his life as his body becomes lethally marked by the greater forces of power.

Perhaps no scene in the *Hostel* franchise better illustrates the relationship between power, torture, and gender than the climax of the second film. Attempting to save herself from Stuart, Beth remarks that she wished Stuart had kissed her when they met the previous day at the harvest festival. Moved, Stuart unties her, upon which Beth attacks him and cuffs him to a chair. Roth then cuts from Stuart's capture to a tracking shot of a group of Elite Hunting guards pushing through the door to reveal Beth brandishing a pistol and holding Stuart captive by the genitals with a of scissors from the room's weapons cache. Through her defense by surrogate phalli, Beth's actions demonstrate what Butler calls the "synechdocal force of law," combating the power embodied by the phallus with its substitutes.[34] Beth then demands to speak to Sasha (Milan Knazko), the CEO of Elite Hunting. Face to face with Sasha, Beth buys her way out of the hostel using a fraction of her inheritance money to outbid Stuart for his own life, severing his genitals

and leaving him to bleed to death after he calls her a "stupid cunt." Through the scene, Roth illustrates the close connection between the physicality of the body and the circulation of power in the globalized economy. Beth may have had enough money to outbid Stuart for the entire film, but she possessed no power until she dominated the phallus with its substitutes. Angered over Stuart's marginalization of her as a "cunt" despite her agency, she strips him of the symbol of his masculinity, not only rendering him powerless but also ending his life.

However, Beth does not maintain her grasp of power. Like all of Elite Hunting's clients, she must honor her contract. After Stuart's death, Roth cuts to a scene of Beth getting her own tattoo—on her lower back rather than bicep—demonstrating her own place within the power structure.[35] Roth ends the film with Beth—wearing a grim reaper costume from the harvest festival—as she decapitates Axelle and watches as a group of Slovakian children play football with the severed head. While Beth saves herself and takes revenge on an individual with personal and professional ties to Elite Hunting, she remains marked physically by the torture she endured and likely marked for death—similar to Paxton—for her murder of Axelle, leaving Roth to end the film with power still circulating throughout the global economy regardless of the numerous acts of torture and murder in the franchise.

**Torture and Repression in Audience Engagement:**
In his essay "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s," Robin Wood discusses the surplus repression of desire that governs the foundations of capitalism. Placing the horror film in dialogue with national culture, Wood argues that it instigates the Freudian "return of the repressed" through depicting the nightmares of its audience: "The conditions under which a dream becomes a nightmare are that the repressed wish is from the point of view of consciousness, so terrible that it must be repudiated as loathsome, and that it is so strong and powerful as to constitute a serious threat."[36] Within the context of 1970s American horror, Wood's analysis engages with the anxieties of the time period, Leatherface's family, Michael Myers, and George A. Romero's zombies serving as apt metaphors for the upheaval and nihilistic sentiment that fragmented the American consensus. Yet, Roth's direct references to current events and global capitalism in the *Hostel* franchise question whether torture porn films are more concerned with the return of the repressed or the acknowledgment of the ignored. When the American client takes a blowtorch to a Japanese girl's face in the first film, the imagery reflects not allegory but actual torture methods used by Saddam Hussein's regime and Al Queda. Likewise, when Josh and Lorna wear fabric hoods before their respective torture scenes, the imagery originates directly from the American military's torture tactics at Abu Ghraib in a similar manner as the film's other torture methods borrow from historical periods ranging from the Middle Ages to Nazi Germany.

Rather than evoke the return of the repressed, Roth's films force his audience to question the acceptance of what American culture fails to repress, the result of nightmares becoming realities. As Fredric Jameson writes about the power of the filmic image in postmodern culture: "The more formal leap, however, will come when for the individual 'victim'—male or female—is substituted the collectivity itself, the U.S. public, which now lives out the anxieties of its economic privileges and

its sheltered 'exceptionalism' in a pseudo-political version of the gothic—under the threats of stereotypical madmen and 'terrorists' (mostly Arabs and Iranians for some reason)."[37] Taking Jameson's commentary into account, the negative reception to Roth's films may, in fact, result from the uncomfortable reactions to seeing one's own self and culture reflected in the graphic depictions of torture that characterize the *Hostel* films. Politicized films such as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and Brian DePalma's *Redacted* (2007) undertake views of American policy atrocities while criticizing political officials and institutions, allowing the audience to place the burden of American deficiencies elsewhere. However, through his use of subjective shots—such as those he uses to execute Paxton's journey to the torture chamber—and his seeming endorsement of his protagonists' violent acts directed against Elite Hunting and its patrons, Roth directly implicates his audience. In the fashion of Jameson, Roth's films hold his audience culpable for the current cultural climate, refusing to allow their horror to become a means of catharsis or blame to fall on one particular entity. As a result, while the films illustrate a vast array of torture scenarios, they refuse to provide the titillation customary of pornographic images, instead exposing an ugly portrait of the audience's own nature that fails to arouse or excite.

Through his use of the horror film to examine the intersections of America and post-Cold War Eastern Europe within the globalized economy, Roth uncovers the complexity of the power dynamics embedded in contemporary international politics. Tracing the circulation of power through his discussion of the human body's commodification and torture, Roth makes his criticisms of American nationalism's narrow scope visceral, exposing his audience to the reality of America's current status within international culture. As Edelstein writes, torture movies do cut deeper than mere gory spectacle in their employment of popular entertainment as a forum to examine the complex power dynamics that govern the political climate. Unfortunately, if the torture porn epithet is any indication, Roth's films, along with the work of the rest of "The Splat Pack," may cut too deeply to resonate with an America only beginning to come to terms with the "with us or against us," either/or political ideology that has been the hallmark of its foreign policy from the Cold War to the War on Terror.

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## Notes

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24  It is also important to note David Chioni Moore's contention that the relationship between the former Soviet Union and nations such as Slovakia can be characterized by a postcolonial dynamic. See "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet?" *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2005: 514-538.

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29  Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge, 1993:123.

30  It should be noted that the only murders Roth shows onscreen in *Hostel* are those that Paxton commits during this scene in the film and during his escape from the compound.

31  Roth alludes to American horror sequels such as Steve Miner's *Friday the 13th: Part 2* (1981) and Chuck Russell's *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (1987) that off surviving protagonists from previous films. However, Paxton's murder is committed offscreen by anonymous individuals, a choice that allows Roth to distinguish his film as a discussion of decentralized power, not the narrative of a recognizable and iconic villain such as Jason Voorhees or Freddy Krueger.

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# The New James Bond

## AND GLOBALIZATION THEORY, INSIDE AND OUT

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As almost every magazine, newspaper, radio, and television film critic has noticed, the new James Bond is different from the old James Bond; he is more serious, more muscular, and less witty.[1] But beyond such cosmetic character traits that came with the style and physique of the new actor Daniel Craig in *Casino Royale* in 2006, its 2008 sequel *Quantum of Solace* reflects a deeper and broader paradigm shift in popular conceptualizations of the world order—a shift from what we might call an "internationalist" perspective to what we might call a "globalist" perspective. The movie's opening song and title-credit sequence announce this shift by surrealistically superimposing global grid-lines of latitude and longitude over a desert landscape of shifting, unstable sand in a manner that alludes simultaneously to the environmental problem of desertification and to the shifting, unstable nature of political alliances due to globalization. In contrast to *Casino Royale*, whose narrative is based on Ian Fleming's 1953 novel, the new film has an entirely original plot for a twenty-first century audience and incorporates some of the concepts and catchphrases of globalization theory. In this regard, *Quantum of Solace* is unique for a Bond movie but not unique among other recent films. The globalization theory that came into vogue in the late 1990s in the halls of academia is now being popularized through suspense-thrillers such as *Lord of War* (2005), *Shooter* (2007), *Jumper* (2008), and *The International* (2009), as well as the more serious dramas such as *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), *The Constant Gardener* (2005), *Babel* (2006), *Blood Diamond* (2006), and *Children of Men* (2006). But popularized how? The DVD of *Children of Men* includes extensive commentary about globalization by such renowned academics as Slavoj Zizek, Tsevetan Todorov, and Saskia Sassen, but of course such scholarly special features on a DVD are the exception—not the rule—for how major motion pictures are popularizing globalization theory.[2]

As Zizek says about *Children of Men* and other movies, *Quantum of Solace* shows the effects of globalization through an indirect, or slanted, representation—an artistic technique that Zizek in so many of his lectures and books calls "anamorphosis." His point is that the emotional or political truth of a situation sometimes cannot be perceived by a direct viewpoint, and so, as in the famous lines of the Emily Dickinson poem, one should "tell all the truth but tell it slant." The background of the movie is the real story for which the foreground is a formal vehicle. In the foreground of *Quantum of Solace*, Bond disobeys his own government apparently to avenge the death of his lover, but in the background the constant presence of the displaced and impoverished Native Americans due to global forces provides a deeper rationale for the plot than what takes

place in the foreground. The new Bond and other recent action-suspense movies reflect a change in popular consciousness about the world order, and some even seem to perform a slanted, anamorphic critique of market-driven globalization, a critique that can be correlated to a simplified version of academic globalization theory. However, at the same time, their stories also reconfirm the ideology of maverick exceptionalism that has always driven the Anglo-American style of global capitalism and has always been Bond's signature ethos.

Bond provides a uniquely useful point of departure for exploring the aestheticization of globalization, for unlike the thrillers such as *The Bourne Supremacy* and *The International* or the movies surveyed in Tom Zaniello's *The Cinema of Globalization* (2006), only Bond films have appeared continuously in movie theaters around the globe for the half a century since the major institutions of the world order—the UN, IMF, GATT (now the WTO), and World Bank—were created. The first movie, *Dr. No*, came out in 1962; *Quantum of Solace* is the twenty-third, and so for the past half century there has been a Bond appearance on the silver screen almost every two years. Changes in the Bond story correspond with historical changes in the world; no other movie character gives us such a singular mirror of history, though, to be sure, it is a distorted circus-like mirror, bizarre and out of proportion. As Tony Bennett and Janet Woolacott argue in *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (1987), the Bond character has successfully served as a condensed expression for Anglo-American society's concerns about the relations between capitalist and communist systems as well as the relations between sexual, national, and racial identities. As such, he quickly became a somewhat indeterminate, floating signifier—a metaphorical figure—that glued together (or *bonded* together, as Bennett and Woolacott pun) overlapping and conflicting ideologies as each film responded to the particular social anxieties of its historical moment. Consequently, Bond developed a cultural life of "his" own *beyond* the novels and films.[3]

Other scholars writing on the history of Bond, such as Jeremy Black, have also emphasized how the novels and movies respond to public anxieties about international crises.[4] As everyone knows, the early Bond films, with titles such as *From Russia with Love* (1963), were mostly about America's relationship to the Soviet Union and various third-world nations during the Cold War. For example, *You Only Live Twice* (1967) focuses on America's relationship with Japan at a pivotal moment in Asia's relationship with the West. In the 50s and 60s, Japan was rebuilding itself out of the rubble of World War II, and although it appeared to be emerging as a major capitalist power, its labor movement and the communist party were growing. The United States government—worried that Japan could shift its political identity towards a left-leaning pan-Asian alliance—actively suppressed Japan's labor movement.[5] But the Bond version of this story is, not surprisingly, a little different. In *You Only Live Twice*,
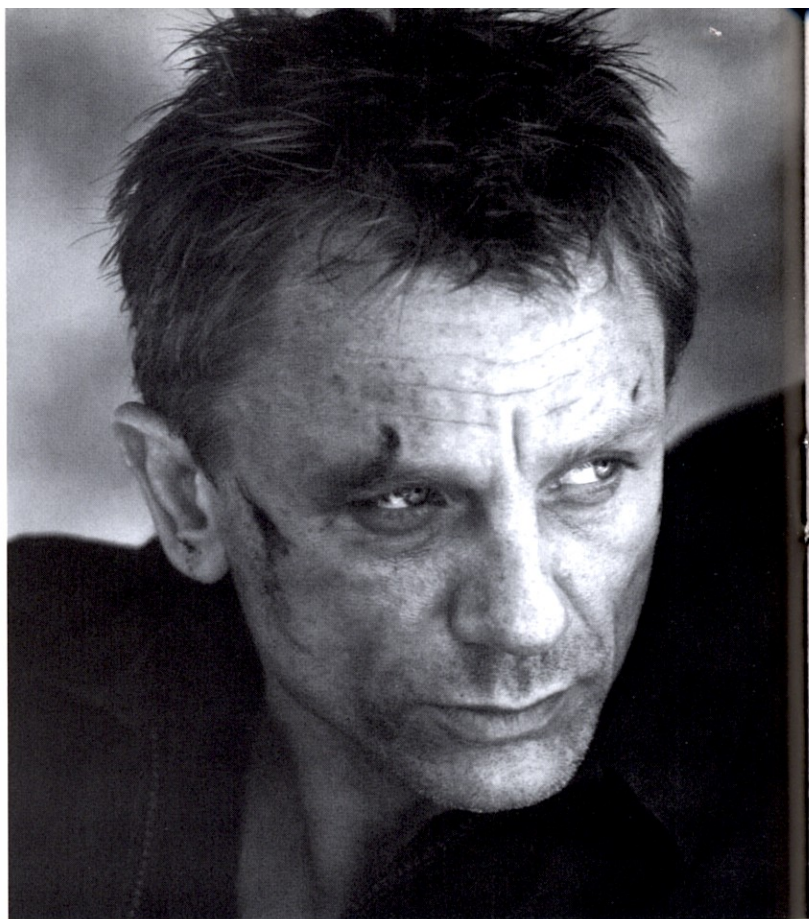
*Quantum of Solace*

British and Japanese secret agents have to prevent a nuclear war between the U.S.A. and U.S.S.R. being clandestinely orchestrated by the evil organization SPECTRE, a Japanese industrialist, and its Asian neighbor China. Over the course of this cooperative, international effort, the Japanese are gradually seduced by the agent of western capitalism—Bond.

After Fleming's death in 1964, the character and movies began to develop independently from the novels. *Live and Let Die* (1973) alludes to the black power movement and the new popularity of blaxploitation films in the United States, and *Moonraker* (1979) to the space shuttle and the "space race." After the fall of the Berlin Wall, an event that signaled the shift from an internationalist to a globalist paradigm, movies such as *GoldenEye* (1995) and *The World Is Not Enough* (1999) had to invent post-Cold War Bond narratives. These plots increasingly addressed the themes of interest to globalization scholars. For instance, in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), Bond went after Rupert Murdock's multinational media corporation before the documentary *Outfoxed* (2004) did, and in *Die Another Day* (2002), he went after the trade in conflict diamonds before the thriller *Blood Diamond* (2006). Nevertheless, not until *Quantum of Solace* was there a Bond movie with a truly global worldview.

Here I disagree with David Earnest and James Rosenau's essay "The Spy Who Loved Globalization" (2000) which argues the Bond movies have always been global and thus were thematically "ahead of their time."[6] They claim that Bond movies are global because the villain is always a "sovereignty-free actor" who can only be successfully combated if the sovereign nation states cooperate, but their claim misses what is distinctive about globalization, and consequently about the new James Bond. The characteristics Earnest and Rosenau identify are actually the fundamentals of the older, internationalist paradigm established at the end of World War II with the UN Security Council, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, and the International Monetary Fund. But globalization is not just the extension of GATT when it became the WTO in 1995; rather, as I will demonstrate, globalization and the theories that emerged alongside it are something new. Hence, there are two moves I wish to make in this essay: the first is to demonstrate how the movie reflects a shift in the popular conceptualization of the world order from an internationalist to a globalist paradigm, and the second is to critique the movie's fantastic distortion of globalization theory—a distortion that reconfirms the maverick exceptionalism of capitalist ideology and obfuscates the issue of political agency.

**From Internationalist to Globalist Paradigm**
Even though the Bond films of the late 1990s and early 2000s began to address more global topics, the lens of Bond continued to represent the world according to an internationalist paradigm in which the precarious peace between the capitalist and the communist nations—their policy of *détente*—seems always at risk. In most of the early Bond films, this *détente* is threatened by the evil organization SPECTRE (Special Executive for Counter-Intelligence, Terrorism, Revenge, and Extortion) or some SPECTRE-like megalomaniac. Metaphorically, SPECTRE is an antithesis to the United Nations. Whereas the United Nations's purpose is to mediate conflict between nations and

prevent global catastrophe, SPECTRE was the underground, invisible organization that manipulated intelligence to create conflict and orchestrate catastrophe. For instance, in *Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1969), there is a scene of the United Nations Security Council deliberating on what to do about SPECTRE, and of course, their recommendation is ineffectual because they do not fully grasp the degree to which SPECTRE is the very antithesis to the world order in the legalistic way the UN understands it, and so James Bond solves the problem in his own extra-legal way. As the Austin Powers parody of Bond drove home, the agenda of SPECTRE rarely seemed very rational, and consequently neither were the secret agent's tactics for foiling its agenda, but in terms of plot, that didn't matter. The evil organization was, symbolically speaking, a pure negative anyway—an inverted image of the positive international order. Onto this ghostly, negative image, the movies symbolically displaced everything that was wrong or could possibly go wrong with the international order—its excesses, its contingencies, its essential contradiction, and its repressed *others* who did not possess full representation or enfranchisement in the world order.

In a sense, the Bond movies enact a displacement of what theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe call "social antagonism" in their Reagan-Thatcher era classic *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). The "antagonists" in Laclau and Mouffe are not the dominant political adversaries of the Cold War so prominent in the Bond films—NATO and Soviet Bloc—but those who have been disenfranchised by the hegemonic version of "universality" endorsed by both powers as well as by global institutions such as the UN and IMF.[7] Examples of social antagonists for Laclau and Mouffe would include Native Americans of North and South America as well as the environmentalist, feminist, and queer social movements. Bond films turned such social antagonism inside-out. The agents of SPECTRE were usually bizarre assemblages of marginalized people of color and sociopathic, wealthy white men with "perverted" sexual appetites and "queer" political views such as the alliance between May Day and Max Zorin in *A View to a Kill* (1985—the same year as Laclau and Mouffe's book). The villains were of ambiguously mixed heritage, and sometimes the script was unabashedly racist, as in the case of *Live and Let Die* in which the villain is a large black man trained by communists. As Bennett and Woolacott argue, the story-lines always present racially and sexually ambiguous characters as epistemological enigmas whose very "out-of-placeness" is what produces the movies' narrative drive and whom Bond must reposition, or "re-place," in the correct order of things. Hence, in the Bond movie, SPECTRE symbolizes the un-symbolizable—those social relations that the economists and political scientists working on behalf of global institutions cannot objectively measure or rationalize. And so, to rectify the seeming irrationality of such social antagonism—cinematically personified as SPECTRE—Bond always had to cooperate United-Nations-style with the beautiful agent from Russia or China or Japan or wherever in order to secure the integrity of the international order. And of course, in the process, Bond's decadent capitalism always seduces the righteous—but still sexy—communist agent or third-world rebel.

The old Bond films fit with this internationalist paradigm, because in that paradigm the "nation" is the central unit of analysis. Academically, in that paradigm, political science courses focused on how the American government worked, or they compared the way one country governed to the way another country governed. International politics courses focused on how nations negotiated treaties with each other and/or exerted influence abroad. Jeremy Black's *The Politics of James Bond* situates the movies in precisely such an international context. Analogously, the study of literature was rooted in national identity and traditions or comparisons thereof. The tacit goal of comparative literature departments in universities was (and in many ways still is) to promote understanding between members of different nations by translating the great works of each other's culture. Such was the poet Goethe's cosmopolitan vision when he first coined the phrase "world literature" two centuries ago.[8]

In a way, Bond is the globetrotting, cosmopolitan graduate of a comparative literature program *par excellence*. Much of the pleasure for viewers of the early Bond films was his travel to other countries, where he demonstrates his ability to quickly learn and master the Russian culture, the Turkish culture, or the Japanese culture—a culture that is always feminized (the woman he must seduce) and always understood in homogenized national terms (this is how all Turks are, how all Japanese are, etc.). Advertising for the early Bond films always emphasized this kind of exoticism, and Bond famously reminds Moneypenny in *You Only Live Twice* that he "took a first in Oriental languages at Cambridge." Of course Bond differs from Goethe because for Bond cultural understanding is just a tool to help him win the spy game, but for Goethe it was a tool for enlarging one's spiritual and ethical being and for promoting peace and understanding among nations. However, one could also argue that the Goethe-inspired comparative literature departments and the James Bond character are less different than they may appear; cosmopolitan intercultural competency is more often than not a privilege of the rich and the educated in first-world nations, a competency that helps them get even richer at the expense of the poor in the third world who lack access to primary education—much less to courses in world literature. As Timothy Brennen argues in his essay "Cosmopolitanism and Internationalism," such cultural cosmopolitanism is the ethos of the globetrotting elite who benefit from the political bureaucratic infrastructure of the nation-state that secures their travel and business itinerary but who also imagine themselves above that infrastructure—imagine themselves subject to no nation and bound by no laws and no culture. The elite's belief in his or her own transcendent universality is a form of self-legitimation, and in some cases it appears to legitimate the private, multinational corporation's use of public institutions for self-serving profit. Hence, to conceive of world literature as a neutral playing field on which all nations play the culture game equally is to misapprehend the reality of the situation—to misapprehend how the rules of the game have been socially constructed within a dynamic system of power relations.[9] Moreover, such nation-centered understandings of culture ignore and repress the diversity of peoples and interests within nations as well as the circulation of capital, commodities, culture, and peoples across borders.

In the new globalist paradigm, the nation is no longer the central unit of analysis; rather it is one unit among many in a political and cultural "network." Globalization theory posits that, since the early 1990s, multinational finance corporations, transnational civil society organizations, underground criminal organizations, and of course global institutions such as the IMF now exert more power than many nation states. As popular culture is becoming increasingly aware, corporations such as Wal-Mart and Exxon Mobil have economies larger than most of the member states of the United Nations, and that dollar for dollar, illegal drugs and guns constitute a larger segment of the global trade than almost any other commodity. Movies such as *Lord of War* about the clandestine gun trade and *The Constant Gardener* about the corrupting power of the pharmaceutical industry dramatize what is now a common belief held by many about how the world works—if not exactly how the world *actually* works.

Re-thinking the essence of globalization, theorists Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in their book *Empire* (2000) argue that the new political form is no longer centered on the nation state but is now a decentered "network" of power relations.[10] Likewise, literary theorists now explore how cultural relations are also decentered, transnational, multicultural, and even global, as cultures circulate across national borders and as artists respond to socio-economic conditions produced by global capitalism. So, for Negri and Hardt, the new global "Empire" is singularly different from the old national empires (e.g., U.S.A, Britain, etc.) because it is decentered and transnational. The standard definition for "transnational" is the "rapid circulation of capital, labor, technology, and media images in a global economy governed by postindustrial capitalism," but along with Negri and Hardt, theorists such as John Carlos Rowe suggest we need to look beneath this easy definition and analyze the political disparities, paradoxes, and contradictions of transnationality deeply felt by those whose lives have been disrupted by political and economic transformations.[11]

*Quantum of Solace* explores this new globalist, transnational paradigm. Its villain Dominic Greene is the front man for a bogus environmental organization Greene Planet that seems to work with various human rights organizations, corporations, and national governments to promote an earth-friendly agenda, but he really uses that money to organize *coup d'états* in small countries and steal natural resources. In contrast to previous Bond villains, Greene works both with the American Central Intelligence Agency and with various corporate interests. The CIA is not deceived by what Greene is—as they might have been in the older Bond movies—but collaborates with him regardless. In terms of the global political structure, as well as the plot's narrative structure, Greene is a nexus of the global network. He is the imaginary figurehead that unites the divergent interests of government, civil society, corporations, and criminals; he symbolizes the secret, behind-the-scenes connections among the powerful. Throughout the movie, Greene seems to be working with both the United States and a Bolivian military general to overthrow the socialist government in order to secure control over Bolivia's oil for multinational corporations. The American and British governments

feel they need Greene's help since their political influence in Latin America has waned over the course of the long, expensive wars in the Middle East. However, it turns out that Greene is deceiving everyone and exploiting their interests in order to secure his own private control over Bolivia's water supply. He has only been pretending to dig for oil and has instead been redirecting rivers which has caused devastating drought and desertification and has forced thousands of Native Americans to migrate to the cities. In a manner unprecedented in Bond film history, not only James Bond but even his boss M respond to this evil by going against the British government's explicit interests. They expose Greene and his corporate allies, foil the *coup d'état*, and (we are led to assume) save the disenfranchised indigenous people of Bolivia (as well as its currently socialist government), from the darker side of global capitalism.

Two unusual characteristics of the plot are salient. First, rather than oppose national governments as the old SPECTRE did, the new formless organization of villainy seems to be part of a network that includes these governments as well as corporations, civil society, criminal organizations, and revolutionary movements. As Greene says in a speech to raise money for Greene Planet, his cosmopolitan-sounding project "is part of a global network with all parts being equal." Here, his speech echoes the new theoretical model for the world order suggested by Negri and Hardt. Hence, in both the movie and such theories, the nation state—while still important—no longer dominates the political agenda and seems not to grasp what its agenda is. Moreover, the various nodes of the network relate to each other in contradictory and conflicting ways. The question that all globalization thrillers raise (often explicitly as in the case of *Lord of War*, *Babel*, and *The International*) is precisely what the secret connections between seeming unrelated institutions and events are. Many of these films, including the new Bond, seem to suggest that the interests of states, corporations, civil society, and criminal organizations all operate together in ways that are anarchic rather than ordered and destructive rather than productive. Amy Kaplan's phrase, "the anarchy of empire," seems *apropos* since it is not only SPECTRE that is creating chaos, but also the institutions of imperial law and order themselves that are.

Second, rather than orchestrate global catastrophe as the old Bond villains were so wont to do, the new Bond villain causes small-sized disasters in third-world countries on behalf of clients in order to enrich both them and himself. The small size of the disaster bothers two of America's most renowned film critics, Roger Ebert and Anthony Lane, who seem to think water rights are not a disastrous enough issue for a Bond film.[12] But as the villain Greene realizes, water—more than oil—is the "most important commodity in the world." Greene's comment echoes the many recent books published on the "water wars" in the context of globalization, all of which discuss the case of Bolivia at length.[13] In contrast to the Bond version of Bolivia's recent troubles, in the 1990s Bolivia was being pressured by the IMF to privatize many of its government-owned industries and publicly run services. In 1999 the multinational corporation Bechtel bought the water rights to Bolivia's third largest city, Cochabamba, and then began charging its people high prices for water. The indigenous peo-

ple soon revolted, forced Bechtel to leave, and regained control of their own water. Bechtel sued the Bolivian people in court but lost the case in 2005. Both the real events in Bolivia and the character of Greene are typical of globalization's history since the 1970s, as it is told by Naomi Klein in her controversial bestseller *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007). Klein argues that the U.S. military-industrial complex has historically taken advantage of disaster-shocked communities both inside and outside America in order to socially reengineer them in ways that ultimately serve the agenda of big corporations at the expense of the underclass.

What is significant about Greene's character is the opposite of what one might have expected a more global villain to be. The old Bond movies were international because its villains plotted a global catastrophe, and one might expect the aspirations of the new Bond villains to be all the more global in scope, but, to the contrary, *Quantum of Solace* is global precisely because its villain plots local disasters. In the old Bond, the villains plotted world domination, but in the new Bond, Greene inserts himself into an already existing hegemonic system; his clients are nation states, corporations, and NGOs; the form of their interrelation is a network. Greene's true villainy is his cruel realization of the environmentalist slogan "think globally, act locally."

The relation of the local to the global is at the heart of globalization theory, and both advertising executives and sociologists have coined a new, evocative term for it: *glocalization*, a neologism that indicates the two contradictory tendencies of the single phenomenon by combining two antithetical concepts into a single word.[14] One is the tendency towards sameness, totalization, and homogenization (also called Americanization or McDonaldization). The other is the intensification of differences or localization (both the fetishization and commodification of exotic commodities and of cultural difference as well as local resistance to American hegemony through a reinvention of traditional culture.) For instance, on the one hand, it is now possible to "buy the world a coke" (quoting the famous commercial jingle) almost anywhere in the world, and it is estimated that half of the world's population has watched at least one James Bond movie.[15] That's homogenization. But a small village that has traditionally made beautiful carpets or harvested a medicinal herb suddenly finds a global market for its product and, hence, its economy and social life is transformed around the reproduction of only one specialized aspect of its cultural identity for mass consumption. That's glocalization. The two questions for sociologists and cultural theorists remain (1) how the forces of globalization create or intensify both samenesses and differences at the same time and even in the same location, and (2) how peoples resist and/or translate these forces, as Frederic Jameson has famously argued in his "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue."[16]

Bond movies have always explored the relation between the local and the global if only because the plot is driven by Bond's travel from one location to another as he chases SPECTRE, but only the new Bond film addresses the dialectical nature of *glocalization*. Only it has a villain who admits that his job is essentially to manipulate local cultures for globalist ends. Only it has a villain who is part of a global network that

includes not only criminals and corporations but also civil society and nation states. Even Bond's personal style reflects this shift in paradigm from international to global. Studies of Bond have noticed how the Bond character has gradually changed over the years from a pompous cosmopolitan to someone more street smart, pragmatic, and alienated, and they have assumed this reflects a difference in how society thinks about class. In other words, their reasoning goes, today in the moral universe of political correctness we are less tolerant of Bond's sexism, racism, and elitism; therefore, the movies had to change. However, I suggest it also reflects the shift from an international world order, in which only the privileged cosmopolitan has access to the cultures of other nations, to a transnational world order, in which everyone experiences the multitude of cultural production as it circulates and transforms daily life everywhere. Nobody today would be impressed by Bond's familiarity with Russian vodka or Japanese sushi. We need Bond to be impressive in other ways. We need him to be more universal, more like an everyman, but with bigger muscles, and we need him to be even more of an alienated, self-righteous loner seeking personal vendettas rather than patriotically serving England. He is, after all, the secret agent working on our behalf, so he must represent our fantasy of political power.

### The Secret Agent's Distortions and the Absence of Political Agency

One of the central questions for globalization theory is the question of agency—how to advocate for one's interests, solve problems, and resolve conflicts—in light of the new fluid, anarchic world order in which there seems to be no grounds for a viable and ethical political agency. Movies about fantastic secret agents such as *Quantum of Solace* imaginatively work through the paradoxes of agency within the new globalist paradigm, but at the same time they distort these paradoxes. The most obvious way the Bond movie and other suspense-thriller movies distort globalization theory is through the personification of evil (though, to be fair, sometimes globalization theorists on both the right and the left sides of the political spectrum come close to doing this as well). Although the new network form defined by globalization theory has no formal political unity and no determinate center, the narrative of *Quantum* follows the conventions of the Bond genre by unifying the dark side of the network form of capitalism through the figure of the villain Dominic Greene.

However, the old plot formula does not work so easily in the new global Bond, and such a division between good and evil is not so clear in *Quantum of Solace*. As both representatives of the CIA and the British foreign service explain at different moments in the movie, the government often has to deal with bad people (i.e., Greene) and do things it knows are wrong (i.e., incite a small-scale disaster or a *coup d'état*.) The CIA and British State Department's rationale for their temporary complicity with evil is that it is more than expedient—it is necessary. But of course their complicity with the global network is the reason why Bond has to go rogue and why his boss M has to pretend to her superiors that she will suppress Bond's investigation when, in spirit, she supports it. Such contradiction and ethical ambiguity is one of the movie's explicit themes, sym-

bolized at the outset by the shifting desert sands during the title credits. Bond's temporary ally Mathis states, "When you get older it's hard to tell the good guys apart from the bad guys," and true enough, Bond accidentally kills a CIA agent who seems to have some connection to the sinister network. The cinematography also explores this theme. The opening car chase and hand-to-hand fight sequences are shot in a way that makes it hard to tell who is who, and the color of their cars and of their clothing are the same (always black), so it is hard to tell them apart. Some film critics have expressed frustration both at this confusing camera work and at the convoluted storyline's ethical ambiguity, but they are missing the point. Perhaps they missed the point because such ambiguity is not typical of Bond.

The essential contradiction that threatens to derail the movie's plot is that Bond and the British Secret Service are just as much a part of that global network as Greene and his nameless, spectral organization. Globalization theory posits that there are not two global networks, one good and one bad—but just one, a single complex network whose defining characteristic is its multiplicity rather than any monolithic unity. Of course, secret agent films require a secret villain, and analogously, even in the real world, both right-wing and left-wing activists continue to indulge the fantasy that the world can be divided up into the sides of good and evil. But new global thrillers—most notably, *The International*—have responded to the challenge of how to have an action plot in which the hero's antagonist is not an antagonist at all, but instead the diffuse, relational network of finance capital and information technology described by theorists such as Negri and Hardt in their books *Empire* and *Multitude*.

The criticisms of Negri and Hardt collected by Gopal Balakrishnan in *Debating Empire* (2005) argue that their fluid, network model allows no grounds for political agency. If we are all part of a network of socio-economic relations, then how can a truly oppositional party form? On what moral and/or economic edifice do we stand when we organize labor unions, advocate for environmental and human rights standards, and protest the policies of the WTO or the IMF? Moreover, if—as the sociologist Zygman Bauman argues about the effects of globalization—we now live not in a new world *order* but in a "new world *disorder*" where "no-one seems now to be in control," then what are we to do but sit back and pray for the best?[17] The suspense plot of the Bond film turns the question about moral and political agency inside out, for the point of the suspense plot is precisely to figure out who the bad guys truly are. But, as M exclaims in frustration, "How can they be everywhere and we not know who they are?" after she jokingly compares them to the global network of florists. The real nature of the global network is that they are everywhere because they are us. Or rather, in the "new world disorder" there is no *us* and *them* anymore. We are complicit whether we know it or not, and as Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* and countless other books demonstrate, the repression of indigenous peoples such as those in Bolivia for corporate profits has been done quite publicly and with the backing of the U.S. and European governments—not secretly by an underworld organization.

Given such complicity with evil, the ethical problem for the film—a problem that makes it more interesting than most of the other Bond movies because it is a problem for the average person as well—is how Bond and M can reclaim their moral agency and justify Bond's quip in the final scene that "all the right people kept their jobs." Indeed, Bond can only find his agency by going against his own government. Admittedly, the morally conflicted, rogue agent is a standard of the spy thriller genre, but this rather stock character takes on a special significance in the context of globalization where it is presented as the only solution to an inherently corrupt world order. In *Shooter* (2007), for instance, the solution seems to be to go on a murderous rampage against one's own senators. Thus, instead of advocating for transparency in civil society, for the democratization of global institutions, and for the consistent application of legal standards to protect human rights—as most activists and many politicians agree should be done—such films present a maverick character whose heroism is defined by his *exception* to such legal standards, democratic decision making, and transparency to the public.

Bond's belief in his own righteousness and ability to set the world aright (by causing just as much chaos as Greene) is of course the maverick logic of exceptionalism, and of course the narrative of the film has to find ways to justify Bond's belief and make it plausible for the audience as well. The narrative devices that serve to justify that exceptionalism are the exaggerated personification of evil and the figure of "the girl" whom Bond saves at the end. Significantly, in the new Bond, that "girl" is an unusually ambiguous character—a beautiful Bolivian who is variously a government agent, a freedom fighter for her people, and a vendetta-seeking individual, and we never find out for sure what she really is. Her protean identity seems to mirror the tangled, undulating network structure of the plot as well as the chaotic, fragmented style of the cinematography. She also has the noteworthy distinction of being the only "Bond girl" in Bond movie history with whom he does not even try to have sex, as several film critics have lamented. The new chastity of the Bond-and-Bond-girl relationship and her increasingly ambiguous status are, I think, symptomatic of the complexities of the globalist paradigm that the movie simultaneously addresses and represses. We see it in other recent thrillers such as *Shooter*, *The International*, and the *Bourne* trilogy. This chastity is needed to justify Bond's exceptional status in ways it was not before because the ethical stakes are more intense, the socio-economic relations are more complex, and the politics no longer follow a binary model of good and evil.

The movie brings us to the point where we cynically distrust all institutions of government and civil society. We are left with Bond and the girl who are alone waging personal vendettas and whom we can believe in only because of the seeming authenticity of their rage. Thus, the movie brings us to the point of a false either/or. Either we cynically do nothing because we are all complicit in the new economic order and can find no solid foundation for agency on the shifting sands of postmodern politics (as in *The International*), or we are as extra-legal and extreme as Bond is (as in *Shooter*). In Bond's universe, we either have no control at all over the processes of globalization or exceptional control. The solipsism of this false

dilemma avoids the everyday political struggles of ordinary people, and it mocks the real forms of political agency such as environmental organizations, international regulatory agencies, and democratic governments, not to mention the very successful indigenous movement that actually occurred in Bolivia eight years before James Bond arrived to save them.[14]

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## Notes

1   Nick LaSalle, "Craig Masters Bond Once Again," *San Francisco Chronicle* (14 November 2008); Wesley Morris, "Action Reaction," *The Boston Tribune* (14 November 2008); A. O. Scott, "OO7 & is Back and He is Brooding," *New York Times* (14 November 2008).

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# Who Wants to be a Screenwriter?

## SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT IN GLOBALIZING INDIA

A writer who wants to become a film scriptwriter must not have an ego; he must be on call at any time of the day and night; and he must have the skill of putting together the most absurd ideas into a proper story, with all or most ingredients to make a jubilee film. He need not be original, logical, or literary. It is better if he does not know English because then he can interpret all foreign films he views as raw material for the film he is writing, without caring for the nuances and the themes of the original. Respect for a film can affect him enough to not want to lift bits and twist them to suit the film he is writing the story for.

— Indian screenwriter Vijay Tendulkar[1]



*Slumdog Millionaire*

PATRICIA GRUBEN

Throughout the history of Indian popular cinema, the writing of screenplays has received little respect from critics, audiences, producers, directors, or screenwriters themselves. It is generally acknowledged that in the Bollywood hierarchy, the status and paycheques of screenwriters are far below those of not only the stars and director, but also the playback singers, music director, production designer, fight director and choreographer. In an industry where spectacle is paramount, writers are more or less invisible. Bollywood films often start shooting without a script or only with the roughest of outlines, and the details are worked out on set by the director, the stars and their allies. Anjum Rajubali, a prolific and successful screenwriter himself, says that the writer's job is not to come up with original ideas or even spec scripts but to carry out the wishes of producer, director and stars almost as glorified stenographers.

The anonymous author is of course not specific to India; it was more or less universal until the European Renaissance and has continued throughout most of the world until at least the modern era. Hollywood screenwriters typically toil in obscurity, applying familiar formulas to their assembly-line productions. But there are at least two distinctive cultural and historical factors in Hindi cinema that keep the screenwriter's status even lower than in classical Hollywood, where writers in the early sound days were sometimes distinguished playwrights and novelists whose names were known to the general public, and a few now are known either for their talent or their enormous paycheques. The first factor is the collective and syncretic nature of artistic practice in India from ancient times to the present; the second is the studio system, inspired by Hollywood but without the checks and balances of organized labour. Yet the climate of Indian film production is evolving rapidly and the role of the screenwriter is changing within it.

## Narrative Style

Saibal Chatterjee defines the Bollywood *masala* film as a pastiche of genres, in which melodrama is infused with comedy, action, romance and song and dance numbers:

> **No mainstream Hindi film…is complete without a long, emotional, dramatic, sanctimonious speech or two, a complement of elaborately shot songs and dances, much buffoonery for comic relief, a story line packed with high-pitched sentimentalism, life-and-death conflicts and, importantly, a happy ending where all problems are miraculously resolved….The principal characters in a popular Hindi film are, generally speaking…clearly defined…larger-than-life, recognizable moral symbols that are polarized between the forces of good and evil. The plots of these films…hinge on pre-determined narrative patterns that compress and project the collective fantasies of a nation. These patterns convey the traditional values and received social wisdom governing the lives of the people and defining the broad parameters of the nation.[2]**

Vancouver-born Arjun Sablok, a staff director at YashRaj Studios in Mumbai, describes the classic Bollywood narrative formula: "In the West you have three acts. In Hindi films we spend an hour just establishing the environment. Nothing goes wrong for the first hour and a half. Then ten minutes before intermission comes the inciting incident…. [Then] typically there's the 'scenes' portion, then the 'outdoor' portion with songs, then the climax."[3]

Bollywood style descends from a long history of collective dramatic creation which disavows the concept of individual authorship. Urdu-Parsi theatre, indigenous regional folk dramas, and oral storytelling traditions, particularly the two great national epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabarata*, have been re-told, regionalized and re-mediated over the course of centuries. Since the early years of silent cinema, when 'mythologicals' based on the stories of Hindu gods emerged as the dominant genre, themes and plots from the epics have continued to resonate in Indian popular cinema, for example in the work of Bollywood *eminence grise* Subash Ghai. [4]

Sumita S. Chakravarty writes that realism is alien to the Indian aesthetic and philosophical tradition, which holds that the world we see is an illusion. Chakravarty contrasts the Aristotelian mimetic model of art against the classical Sanskrit view that art should elevate the mind through the agency of character typology, ritualized emotional states, and a delicately balanced moral universe.[5] One major influence on the *masala* form is the 3rd-century vedic theory of *rasa*, a set of rhetorical moods—love, amusement, sorrow, anger, dynamic energy, fear, disgust and wonder (as well as a ninth *rasa* added later, serenity)—expressed in classical Indian music, theatre, poetry and dance. The goal of *rasa* is to transmute ordinary subjective emotion into an aesthetic experience in which one can take pleasure, even if to feel the emotion directly would be distasteful. Patrick Colm Hogan notes that authors and audiences for classical Indian drama were mindful of Aristotelian models of plot coherence and characterization, "but in cases of conflict, they [would] probably choose a consistent *rasa* over clearer realism or tighter narrative logic."[6]

Over the centuries this formalist representation of emotional states has dominated both high and popular culture, countering the western tendency toward realism. Although it is considered ideal to have one or two major *rasas* in a work of art, popular Hindi cinema tends to cram in as many as possible, careening from comedy to song and dance, romance, and tragedy in a style that may disorient Western audiences but is familiar and conventional for Indians. Vijay Mishra calls Bollywood a genre in itself, whose dominant form is epic or romantic melodrama, "one heterogeneous text under a transcendental dharmic principle" featuring both "encyclopedic form, and a textual capacity to elicit a wide variety of responses from the audience, limited to a thoroughly nativist aesthetic of *rasa*."[7]

## The Bollywood System

Another major factor in the screenwriter's status derives from the Hindi model of studio production. In Bombay cinema at least through the 1950's, most writers worked on salary for the studios churning out product for directors, who were regarded

as the authors of the films. As screenwriter Anjum Rajubali notes: "They were never referred to as scriptwriters; they were storywriters—a most crucial distinction. Most of them enjoyed the status of *munshis*—clerks who could wield an efficient pen and take dictation."[8]

After World War II the power of the studios was tempered by the rise of an investor class with the financial clout to back popular *auteurs* like Guru Dutt, Raj Kapoor and Bimal Roy.[9] These directors, two of whom were also major stars, did not write their own scripts, but worked closely with regular collaborators— Kapoor with K.A. Abbas , Dutt with Abrar Alvi, Roy with Nabendu Ghosh—in the creation of their best work.[10] Still, according to Rajubali, even the writer-director collaborations were entirely under the director's control:

> **The passion and vision of the director engulfed everything in the film, including the writer's work. For the director, the film was a personal statement. Director-writer partnerships flourished because the writer was able to mould himself to the director's vision…The writer's work was never separate from that of the director; it was subsumed within it.[11]**

Among the few notable exceptions was the famous lyricist Gulzar, who became a respected screenwriter on a number of prestigious projects, and directed several himself. Then, in the early 70s, the writing team of Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar (known as Salim-Javed) broke out with a new Indian genre that made them famous in their own right and thus somewhat independent of the directors with whom they worked. With megahits like *Zanjeer* (1973), *Deewaar* (1975) and *Sholay* (1975), they created the 'angry young man' persona which transformed Amitabh Bachchan into the quintessential Indian film star for the next thirty years and ushered in the anti-heroic crime genre which has remained one of the dominant motifs in Bollywood cinema. Salim-Javed wrote eighteen films together, most of which were hits, and remain active working separately and together. Yet Rajubali argues that their success was due not to originality, but to introducing a disciplined narrative structure shaped by a pattern of conflict and resolution.

> **They took commonplace concepts, most of which had been done to death earlier, and turned them into unique screenplays….[I]t did not matter if the story was predictable or even clichéd. The narrative could still be gripping if it kept delivering well set up dramatic surprises at carefully crafted intervals….Their keen understanding of the narrative form gave them the freedom to lift large bits— characters, sequences and devices—from other films and make these their own…It was not only a good story that mattered; it was how well that story was told.[12]**

Other critics complained that the professional discipline which Salim-Javed brought to the Indian film industry overwhelmed its earlier literary origins in favour of action, and substituted Western-style subjects and structures for Indian forms.[13] Despite Salim-Javed's influence in adapting Hollywood genres and narrative models to Indian subjects, indigenous styles have

continued to flourish and develop. Most notable is the family romance, ushered in by the fantastic success of *Hum Aapke Hain Koun [What Am I to You?]* in 1994; instead of a plot it features a series of musical set pieces connected by situation comedy, with a convenient accident providing the one complication that keeps the lovers apart for 200 of its 206 minutes. No sexual rivalry, romantic conflict or domestic tragedy is too daunting to be solved by a good song and dance number. Similarly, the Hollywood crime drama first 'Indianized' by Salim-Javed has become a formula over which anonymous screenwriters toil for the benefit of stars like Bachchan, Sanjay Dutt and Ajay Devgan. Chatterjee writes that since the 1950's when matinee idols Dev Anand, Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor gained control of their own productions, Hindi films "have been conceived, funded and executed on the whims and fancies of the saleable stars that, more than the plots of the films they feature in, drive Mumbai cinema."[14]

## Parallel Cinema

But what of alternative forms, the great Indian art cinema exemplified by Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen? India's National Film Development Corporation was set up in 1975 to carry on the traditions of these neorealist masters, whose work explored important social themes and was often adapted from the writings of Tagore or other serious Indian novelists. Tendulkar scornfully describes the government-funded heirs of this tradition as beset by the same formulaic indulgences as the Bollywood machine: "This single theme [of social injustice] was conveyed without the popular ingredients of the mainstream films. The locale would be different, but the content and the *denouement* of the story was the same."[15] The NFDC required a script with each funding application, but directors with credentials would tend to submit incomplete or early drafts, promising to improve them later, and the script committee would be intimidated into accepting them; often little additional work would be done before shooting began. Directors tended to write their own scripts or work with novelists who had little screenwriting experience, and the screenplays often suffered from lack of discipline.

> **[E]ven in this more serious business of filmmaking, tentativeness and the ever-changing script of a film in the making became the norm. The director's brainwave or the last minute collective contribution of the film unit to the script was an established practice. A writer was needed only till he gave the 'screenplay' for submission. Then it was a collective job of the film unit to 'improvise,' 'improve,' and make the script worthy of the film to be made. The end product was as flawed as the process by which it was made."[16]**

In the past two decades India has produced a number of world-class novelists:, Anita and Kirin Desai, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Amitabh Ghosh and many others, whose work has *not* been made into Indian films. The filmmakers who draw on Indian literature tend to live outside the country. Mira Nair's *The Namesake* was adapted from Jumpa Lahiri's eponymous Indo-American novel. Mehta's *Earth* came from Pakistani novelist Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India*; her most recent feature,

*Heaven on Earth*, is loosely adapted from Giresh Karnad's play *Naga Mandala*, and, she is currently working with Rushdie to adapt his epic *Midnight's Children*. Anita Desai wrote a script based on her novel *In Custody* for Ismail Merchant and James Ivory. All of these are 'literary' novels, and all of the directors and producers have western financing.

There is virtually no tradition in contemporary Indian cinema of adapting popular fiction, instead, popular Hindi films regularly either recycle old plots or borrow from Western films without attribution. These can be anything from popular action movies to such middlebrow fare as Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Black* (2005), inspired by the Helen Keller biopic *The Miracle Worker* with the added twist that the teacher on whom the deaf, blind and mute woman depends is succumbing to Alzheimer's. *Ghajini*, a hit from 2008, is based on *Memento* except that the story isn't told backwards. Some filmmakers will literally copy an American or other film shot for shot, studying the DVD on set.

Of course Hollywood has also drawn on movie ideas from other countries, and increasingly on comic books and sequels, followed by a general lament from audiences and critics that there are no new ideas at the studios. American screenwriters complain of exploitation and disrespect over the practice of hiring serial writers, tailoring scripts for inappropriate actors, or changing the dialogue on set. It is rare anywhere in the world to find screenwriters content with their status and creative environment. But at least in Hollywood the screenwriter is reasonably well paid, recognized in the credits and protected by legal contracts and the Writer's Guild of America. In India contracts are minimal or nonexistent, and the Film Writers Association "is powerless to ensure the implementation of any contract, running shy as it does of any confrontation with the powerful producers' lobby."[17]

## The Evolving Scene

In the past decade, major changes in the economy and culture of the film industry have had an impact on not only distribution and marketing, but on the screenwriter's role as well. Until 1998, except for the limited funds of the National Film Development Corporation for low-budget art films, film investment was entirely in the hands of private investors, who were sometimes laundering black money. In 1998 filmmaking was recognized by the government as a legitimate industry; in 2000 the Industrial Development Bank of India Act was amended to allow banks to lend money to producers.[18] As a result, more financial and creative accountability is now required, which leads to more reliance on screenplays as part of the planning process. Producer Ramesh Taurani says: "The film industry is being forced to professionalize its workings, much against its wishes. But there is no choice. Without full-fledged scripts, costs cannot be controlled. And once the script is approved by the producer/star/ director, the film will not deviate from it. We can't afford to make films to suit the whimsical egos of stars and directors; the cost of failure is just too high."[19]

Marketing concerns are resulting in shortening films from an average of three hours to 2 1/4 to allow two screenings in a night and enable the new urban multiplexes to stagger their shows on the half-hour. This means relinquishingf either some of the song and dance numbers or the first hour of establishing scenes before the story gets going.[20] Big traditional studios like YashRaj are looking forward with films like *Chak De! India* (2007), a huge hit with Shahrukh Khan as a disgraced field hockey captain who coaches the underdog Indian women's team to a world championship—a familiar story to Western audiences, but a novelty for mainstream India with its tightly plotted script, glamourless female athletes, and lack of 'dance items'. YashRaj, run by legendary 76-year-old Yash Chopra, is looking for new ideas and has charged Indo-Canadian director Arjun Sablok with bringing young diasporic talent into the company to help it appeal to younger and more international audiences . YashRaj has agreements with both Disney and Sony, and is currently developing an Anglo-Indian comedy with Gurinder Chadha (*Bride and Prejudice, Bend It Like Beckham*). As Sablok points out, for a company like YashRaj everything is driven by the audience. If the audience starts enjoying films with pre-written scripts like *Chak De! India*, they'll continue to move in that direction. Still, 80% of Indians still see films not in the multiplex but in single-screen theatre for 20 rupees (about 50 cents), and for them YashRaj will continue to make films in traditional Bollywood style.

In the past decade, the increasing prosperity and growth of the Indian middle class, and the globalization of the audience, has generated a new kind of 'middle cinema'. These films use popular stars, high production values and spectacular 'dance items' to explore serious themes of national identity, political corruption and religious conflict. Vishal Bharadwaj has made two terrific Shakespeare adaptations, *Omkara* (Othello) and *Maqbool* (Macbeth), both set in the gangster world of contemporary India. Rakesh Omprakesh Mehra has written and directed the well-reviewed *Rang de Basanti*, the story of a young filmmaker who comes to India to make a film about her British grandfather's recognition of colonial injustice, as well as *Delhi 6* (2008), a big-budget musical which chronicles the conflicts in a mixed Hindu-Muslim neighbourhood. The Tamil filmmaker Mani Ratnam is known for mixing brilliant music and dance scenes with themes of national identity and cultural difference in films like *Guru, Dil Se* and *Bombay*. Yet these films, polished as they are, have rarely had theatrical distribution outside beyond the diasporic cinemas of North America and Europe.

In the past decade, smaller-budget independent films for the indigenous, educated Indian audience are emerging, partly due to the proliferation of smaller urban venues provided by the multiplexes. One of the best is Dibakar Banerjee's 2008 film *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye! (Hey Lucky!)*, a dark comedy about a charming young con artist which was much praised for its realistic but satirical portrayal of contemporary middle-class Delhi materialism. Banerjee develops his scripts with young writers who have original stories, often based on their own experiences.

## The Western Market

Indian cinema does have a huge diasporic audience, whose tastes differ to some degree from what's popular in the mother country. Historical epics like *Asoka* (2001), *The Rising: Ballad of Mangal Pandey* (2005) and *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), or films like *Swades* (2004) and *Delhi 6* (2008),about alienated migrants discovering warm and colourful family values in the homeland are well-received by the migrant community along with more general popular fare like *Singh is Kinng*, last year's big screwball adventure crime comedy which featured a rap from a bemused Snoop Dogg in its closing titles.

But Indian filmmakers have bemoaned their inability to break through to mainstream Western audiences in the manner of Hong Kong action films or the big Chinese costume dramas of Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige have done. There is no Indian equivalent to Ang Lee or John Woo working in Hollywood (though London-based Shekhar Kapoor comes closest) and no one in working in India with the international artistic visibility of Wong Kar Wai or Hsiao-Hsien Hou (though the diasporic feminist trio of Mehta, Chadha and Nair have many fans). *Lagaan*, Sony India's first production, captured Western attention with its plot about a village whose resistance to an occupying British garrison takes the form of a thrilling life-and-death game of cricket. *Lagaan*It received an Academy Award nomination in 2001, but its success did not develop into a major wave of New Indian Cinema, and director Ashutosh Gowariker's subsequent films have not appealed to Anglo audiences. No American studio attempted another production in India until *Saawariya* (2007). Its popular and critical reception in North America was typical of the bemused Western attitude toward Bollywood:

> **Saawariya is a lush production featuring fabulous though deliberately artificial sets, an extravagant musical score, ten new songs and two newcomers with much potential as the story's star-crossed lovers. The film…will resonate with Indian audiences everywhere as well as those who delight in Hindi-language commercial cinema. But the film is unlikely to create any meaningful new fan base among those unfamiliar with Bollywood films. For audiences unaccustomed to the format, the film runs too long—though it is short by Bollywood standards—and is repetitive, sentimental and cliched.**[21]

Meanwhile, independent filmmakers have struggled to work with the American studios in a more autonomous relationship that will promote smaller-budget yet entertaining films with international appeal. Vancouver-based producer Mel D'Souza formed a collective with young filmmakers Dev Benegal, Kaizad Gustad, Nagesh Kukunoor and Sunil Sippy which was on the verge of a studio deal with Sony in 2001; but like so much else, it fell apart in the post 9/11 recession. Now, Indian companies like UTV's Spot Boy, Planman Motion Picture, Tropicfilm, Phat Phish Motion Pictures and a few others are positioned to fill the niche, and Benegal's new film *Road Movie* has been picked up for theatrical distribution by Fortissimo.[22]

Ironically, the film that has done the most for Indian cinema in the West is, of course, *Slumdog Millionaire*—written, directed and financed from the UK, though adapted from Vikas Swarup's Indian novel *Q & A* and shot in a mixture of English and Hindi. *Slumdog Millionaire* has grossed $361 million to date[23] and won eight Oscars, making it a huge topic of discussion at the recent FICCI-FRAMES producers' conference in Mumbai. Is it an Indian film or a Western film set in India? While it has stylistic affinities with director Danny Boyle's earlier Scottish work, *Slumdog Millionaire* is a *masala* film—action, romance, melodrama, comedy and tragedy rolled into a ball driven by A.R. Rahman's eclectic, hypnotizing soundtrack. Now Sony, Disney, Warner's and Fox are all working on joint ventures with Bollywood production companies.[24] With audiences paying $10 to see films at the multiplexes, the huge Indian market is a potential goldmine. This makes it difficult for Bollywood scripts to be lifted from Hollywood films without attribution, but of course the Hollywood studios can remake their own hits. At the 2009 FICCI-Frames producers' conference, actor/writer Rahul Bose suggested new genres for Indian films that could 'go global': martial arts, children's, dramas with international cast, and mockumentaries.

India's turn toward international capitalization is are clearly having an effect on film form, most significantly under the influence of Western cinema; globalization is an increasing threat to the cultural specificity of narrative styles. At the same time, Bollywood style has had an increasing influence on the western world as audiences tire of realism and look abroad for new musical forms and 'cinema of attractions'. *Moulin Rouge, Magnolia, Ghost World, Mamma Mia*, and of course *Slumdog* itself reflect the Bollywood-influenced integration of music/dance performance into western narrative, bounced back from its ongoing dialogue with classic Hollywood musicals. Lalitha Gopalan notes that "the fragmentary narrative cited as a unique feature of New Hollywood has long been a cinematic style in Indian popular cinema:

> **In a curious twist in the history of appropriation and application of film theory across national cinemas, certain ontological questions surrounding narrative cinema—questions that Eisenstein raised in his famous essay on 'montage of attractions'—find a fertile ground in contemporary Indian cinema.**[25]

The question still hanging is whether India's historical ability to digest and recreate the culture of its invaders will be able to control the intense pressure of American studios for international co-ventures, the increased influence of international film and television pouring into the country, the demands of the global economy and the hegemony of the structuralist American model of screenwriting. For an insight into all these questions it is interesting to look at the burgeoning growth of screenwriting education in the country.

## Screenwriting Training

In India to date, there has been little formal training available for screenwriters.[26] There are virtually no university-based film writing or production programs; a few colleges like Xavier Institute of Communication, affiliated with the University of Mumbai, offer a one-year program in comprehensive film/television production for university graduates, but with only minimal focus on screenwriting. The two national film schools, the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in Pune and the Satyajit Ray Institute of Film and Television (SRIFT) in Kolkata, have provide the most prestigious and professional training in the country; entry into these Soviet-model academies is highly competitive. FTII initiated a one-year screenwriting stream for twelve students in 2004; there is much debate among students and faculty about indigenous national styles vs. the Hollywood formula. At SRFTI, screenwriting is a minor component of the directing program, as the stated intention is to produce *auteur* directors in the Bengali tradition. There is no dedicated teacher of screenwriting on the faculty, though

there have been workshops run by visiting instructors.

In response to the perceived reluctance of FTII and SRFTI to deliver commercially-motivated graduates to the Bollywood industry, producer/director Subash Ghai has established Whistling Woods International Institute for Film, Television, Animation and Media Arts on the grounds of Film City, the site of several major film studios at the north end of Mumbai. Anjum Rajubali is the head of screenwriting at both FTII and Whistling Woods, but the orientation of the two schools is distinctly different. The American dean of Whistling Woods speaks publicly of his disdain for Bollywood musicals, and uses *Sex in the City* as a model in his own screenwriting classes. However, since its opening in 2007, Whistling Woods has worked to counter its reputation as a playground for the wealthy; its faculty are both industry-experienced and critically aware, and they offer courses in film history and criticism as well as practical skills. The screenwriting program has recently lowered its tuition and raised its academic requirements.

Familiar Hollywood screenwriting gurus such as Syd Field have begun touring India, and dozens of how-to screenwriting books are showing up in Indian bookstores. The respected London-based Script Factory did a workshop in 2007, and Vancouver-based Praxis Centre for Screenwriters has organized short courses at Xavier Institute of Communication, SRFTI and the Kerala Film Festival. Now Indian writers are putting together their own workshops with a combination of public and private sponsorship. Rajubali ran short programs in 2007 and 2008 at the Goa Film Festival, sponsored by the NFDC; this year's offering includes a week at the Locarno Film Festival. A new five-day screenwriting course sponsored by Indian Institute of Technology, Madras has just been sponsored by the Tamil star Kamal Haasan, who drew on his friendship to attract major writers and directors like Shekhar Kapur, Rakesh Omprakash Mehra, Rituparno Ghosh, the ubiquitous Rajubali, and Jean-Claude Carriére (who has been involved with several Indian films and adapted the *Mahabarata* with Peter Brook as a miniseries for Channel Four in 1989). The course had more than 1400 applicants, and 250 were admitted. Two other writers, Kamlesh Pandey and Ben Rekhi, have launched ScriptWalla, a ten-week workshop for twelve aspiring screenwriters to develop scripts their projects, which will then be presented to Indian production houses.[27] Rajubali says that the young writers he works with were initially fascinated by the structure-driven U.S. model, but are now beginning to resist its tyranny or at least to incorporate its dicta into their own styles. Meanwhile, online Indian film critic Rajesh Kumar Singh whips up the winds of cultural nationalism in his review of *Slumdog Millionaire*:

> **And here is a passionate plea to some of our own filmfakers. Dump all the Tarantino and Boyle and Hollywood and French and Italian and Korean shit in the Mithi river…. [L]et great and genuine Indian ideas penetrate your thick heads. You have mastered the technique, rule the art now with brand new indigenous and artistic perspectives of the world around you. Rise and shine, and go for the glory with confidence. Do not fight shy, and never be apologetic. Don't run down your unique narrative approach and style. Be proud of your dance and song numbers….It is your time now. You can**

**conquer the world. Awake, arise, and stop not till you have reached the pinnacle of glory.**[28]

It seems likely that once again India will find a way to take what it wants from the West and turn it into unique and inventive forms, as it did from with the British and Moghul cultures in past centuries. Mani Ratnam, Vishal Bharadwaj, Rakash Omprakash Mehra and Dibakar Banerjee have shown that new forms of cinematic storytelling in popular and parallel cinema can continue to draw on the distinctive identity of Indian culture without either ignoring or succumbing to the Hollywood juggernaut. After all, the juggernaut is an Indian invention.

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### Notes

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2 Chatterjee, Saibal (1), "Hindi Cinema Through the Decades. "*Encyclopaedia of Hindi Cinema*. New Delhi: Encyclopaedia Brittanica, 2003, 3–23: 3.
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# Hop on Pop

## *JIANGSHI* FILMS
## IN A TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

STEPHANIE LAM

On eHow.com, an instructional website with the tagline "How to Do Just About Everything," one finds the following article: "How to Defeat a Chinese Hopping Vampire." Listed are 5 easy steps for anyone who should encounter such a being. They are as follows:

1. Pin a spell to the vampire's forehead. This spell should be written in chicken's blood, on a piece of thin yellow paper. This will subdue them.
2. Fend them off with a Ba-qua mirror, which is an 8-sided mirror often used in Feng Shui. Reflect the light in their direction, and they will beat a retreat.
3. Attack them with a sword made of lucky Chinese coins. This sword must first be charged, which is done by placing it in the light of a full moon.
4. Freeze them in place with a dab of blood to the forehead.
5. Fling sticky rice at them. The sticky rice will draw out the evil, banishing them.[1]

Aside from such instructional texts on how to defeat a Chinese Hopping Vampire, more elaborate internet fan sites and discussion threads exist devoted specifically to describing the *jiangshi*'s origins, its similarities to and differences from Western vampires and the most effective way to combat one. Such factoids are gleaned from close readings of Hong Kong produced *jiangshi dianying* or "cadaver movies," and the films themselves are consolidated into a canon of sorts by enthusiasts. Fans of *jiangshi* films are quick to point out that the term "Hopping Vampire" is in fact a misnomer. The *jiangshi* is technically not of the same ilk as a Western vampire in that it does not feed on blood but rather seeks to absorb *qi* or life force from humans. More accurately, according to Chinese folklore, they are the revenants or reanimated corpses of those who were either improperly buried or died unusually cruel deaths. Although one could go on to speak at more length about the *jiangshi*'s features, its strengths and weakness and its place in a supernatural order, the more salient point to emphasize is that the figure of the *jiangshi* was only brought fully into the Chinese popular imaginary through Hong Kong films of the 1980s and 90s. The use of the descriptive term "vampire," Stephen Teo notes, was a decision made by Hong Kong publicists for marketing purposes.[2] No doubt this label is precisely what



Poster for *The Legends of the Seven Golden Vampires*

draws a comparative impulse in both Chinese and Western viewers. Due to the *jiangshi* film's peripheral point of origin, its lo-fi aesthetic and its eclectic mixing of genres, the films enjoy considerable cult status in the West, where discourse has tended to fixate on the body of the vampire as a curiosity both familiar and strange.

It is precisely the body of the *jiangshi* that is of interest to me, for in its hybrid and liminal status, it is in many ways a perfect vehicle for the exploration of Hong Kong identity. While *jiangshi* films circulate globally as mass entertainment, these films also speak to particular local sentiments regarding cultural location and ethnicity. Ackbar Abbas and Stephen Teo have looked at the ways in which Hong Kong cinema of the late 1980s and 1990s turned to questions of identity, nationality and ethnicity as a way of working through anxieties spurred by the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984. As Teo notes, during and after the period of negotiation "'a China syndrome' began to develop in the territory, colouring perceptions of kinship and cultural affinity with undertones of political anxiety and fear."[3] Young Hong Kong filmmakers, while acknowledging the influence of Western cinematic traditions, also began tracing the roots of Hong Kong cinema in the Shanghai films of the 30s and in even older Chinese literary and theatre traditions. Responding to the pending handover in 1997, Hong Kong cinema of this period was marked by intense exploration and identification with an imagined Chinese heritage. The Chinese influence, writes Teo, "began to manifest itself as an identification with China as the source of one's culture and language, a kind of abstract nationalism that while registering it, bypassed fear and loathing for the communist regime as well as for aspects of the colonial, *laissez-faire* capitalism which ruled Hong Kong and Taiwan."[4] I argue that while the *jiangshi* film, a quirky hybrid of kung fu, horror and slapstick comedy has considerable global appeal, it also serves as a medium for exploring the specific concerns of a local Hong Kong populace.

In order to think through the multiple ways in which the body of the *jiangshi* signifies within a Chinese popular imaginary as a vehicle for negotiating cultural identity, I will examine three films: *Mr. Vampire/Jianshi Xiansheng* (Hung, Hong Kong 1985), *The Legend of the Seven Golden Vampires* (Baker, Britain and Hong Kong 1974), and *The Gods Must Be Crazy III*, also known as *Crazy Safari/Fei Zhou He Sheng* (Chan, Hong Kong 1996). Specifically, I am interested in how one might read these popular texts allegorically as reflections of real historic and desired geopolitical relations. Taking Arjun Appadurai's view of the "imagination as social practice," I will examine how these films, in their movements through local and transnational circuits, reimagine relations between individual and national bodies. According to Appadurai, "the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work, and a form of negotiation between sites of agency and globally defined fields of possibility...."[5] Each of these films map out a unique topography of social relations between fictitious sites of agency, and it is the figure of the vampire—as archetype and pop cultural icon—that allows for a negotiation between these sites.

For a diasporic population, frequently connection with an imagined homeland is maintained via consumption of the popular media produced from within these regions. As with many of the Chinese diaspora, growing up in Calgary, my own exposure to these films was via late-night Chinese television and laser disc rentals from Chinatown. The Hong Kong film industry, being relatively small in size, has always depended on exports to sustain itself. Serving a dispersed Chinese population, as well as providing popular entertainment for neighboring Asian markets—and with the advent of home-viewing technologies and exposure via international film festivals, a Western audience—it has contributed substantially to what Appadurai terms a global *mediascape*: the distribution of electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information. "Whether produced by private or state interests," Appadurai writes, "mediascapes tend to be image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality."[6] National popular cinemas, in their ability to reach dispersed populations who continue to identify culturally and politically with these geographic locales, play a significant part in imaging and articulating historic and emerging relations between peoples and places, ties that have become both fractured through migration and creatively reimagined through media texts.

Watching Hong Kong produced *wuxia* (martial arts) and horror films provide a window onto a space I equate with Chineseness. I am interested in how the *jiangshi* genre, in opening onto a complete space of fantasy, allows for the exploration and articulation of what Teo terms "abstract" or "cultural" nationalism. For Teo, cultural nationalism manifests itself as an affiliation with an abstracted sense of national heritage without explicit ties to state bodies. Best exemplified in the films of Bruce Lee, where the kung fu adept serves as an appropriate expression of cultural pride and potency, much of Hong Kong genre films are coded in such a way as to speak to specific Chinese and diasporic desires for cultural affiliation. Lee's Chinese nationalism, Teo argues, cannot be easily dismissed as narcissistic or xenophobic (although it is in many ways these things) if one wishes to understand its particular appeal to Chinese audiences:

> **The nationalism Lee's films invoked is better understood as an abstract kind of cultural nationalism, manifesting itself as an emotional wish among Chinese people living outside China to identify with China and things Chinese...They wish to affirm themselves and fulfill their cultural aspirations by identifying with the 'mother culture', producing a rather abstract and apolitical type of nationalism.[7]**

By apolitical, Teo refers not to the absence of political undertones within Lee's films—indeed his characters often express overt anti-American sentiment—but rather to cultural nationalism's particular de-emphasis on state politics. In order to grasp the appeal of and need for this particular form of nationalism, Teo suggests that one must look at its philosophical underpinnings and historic lineage. The concept has complex roots in a Chinese dynastic rule that regarded China as the centre of the universe. The term *tianxia*, literally meaning "between heaven and earth" or "all under heaven," has long signified the Chinese Empire and the rest of the world's location within a cosmological order at the heart of the Heavenly Kingdom. According to Confucian orthodoxy, the dual concepts of *tianxia* and *guo* specified different aspects of Empire: "*tianxia* designated a civilizational value, whereas *guo* referred to a regime of

power, to what the West would regard as a state government…"[8] The notion of *tianxia,* with its focus on the moral and cultural aspects of Chinese civilization and its concern for the well-being of the people, was mobilized by Chinese nationalists in the twentieth century as an ideological foundation for supporting the intense stages of economic modernization needed for China to compete in a global economy.[9] A Chinese nationalism that engages the concept of *tianxia* imagines a fundamentally different worldview from that of a Euro-American tradition that posits the nation-state as an autonomous and self-interested party in a competitive global sphere. Having geographical meaning and sentimental resonance, *tianxia*'s application to a nationalist rhetoric paradoxically promotes China as Empire while imagining a harmonious global order with a de-emphasis on territorial borders. Today this form of cultural nationalism has evolved to accommodate the needs of disparate Chinese populations whose historic ties to the nation-state have been severed: "This ideology is particularly suited to a diasporic people since it allows them to remain distant from 'their' state while retaining pride in the cultural value allegedly embodied in their tradition which is, as all traditions are, highly portable."[10] Like the films of Bruce Lee, I would suggest that by exploring the representational strategies of *jiangshi* films, one finds strong articulations of a Chinese cultural nationalism.

## Mr. Vampire

*Mr. Vampire,* directed by Sammo Hung in 1985, is generally regarded as having kick-started the *jiangshi* trend in Hong Kong filmmaking, whose popularity lasted roughly a decade. A subgenre of the Chinese ghost story films, Hung's *Mr. Vampire* series freely mixes together kung fu, slapstick comedy, Chinese folklore and Western vampire motifs in a manner that appeals to both local and global sensibilities. Specifically, one sees how the film might have obvious resonances with a local Hong Kong and diasporic audience in that it allegorically addresses issues of hybridity and colonial history. In the first of the *Mr. Vampire* series,[11] Hung developed the formula to which future *jiangshi* films would more or less adhere. The ingredients include one to two Taoist priests, a couple of bumbling assistants, a smattering of wayward corpses, and at least one vengeful female ghost. Add to this the figure of a Western-educated female love interest and one colonial-sympathizer and the stage is set for *Mr. Vampire*'s particular brand of action comedy. Read allegorically, the real conflict in the film is not between humans and cadavers, but between an abstracted Chineseness and a British colonial presence. The *jiangshi* signifies an unstable middle ground in that its body, always in transit toward a final resting place, is neither here nor there, neither dead nor truly alive. It is literally a puppet through which a Taoist priest, marked by his access to traditional martial arts and mysticism, exercises simultaneous control and care. As ancestral bodies, the *jiangshi*'s unmooredness and excess can only be contained through recourse to traditional knowledge, folklore and authentic kung fu fighting. Guns and Western rationality in these films are equated with cowardliness, coded as ineffective tools and frameworks for taming the *jiangshi*'s unruliness. The film depicts colonial sympathizers as paradoxically repressive and effeminate, suggesting that the real site of patriarchal power and right lies with the Chinese traditionalists. In insisting upon the importance of ritual and myth, the film symbolically refuses British colonial rule in favor of a Chinese authority and heritage—even as this heritage is idealized and abstracted through fantasy and mythology.

## Legends of the Seven Golden Vampires

While *Mr. Vampire* works through these anti-colonial sentiments at a local level, *The Legend of the Seven Golden Vampires,* a 1974 co-production between Britain's Hammer Films and Hong Kong's Shaw Studios in many ways anticipated the popularity of *Mr. Vampire* and its subsequent imitators. As I.Q. Hunter suggests, in the face of waning influence and in light of Bruce Lee induced kung-fu mania in the West, Hammer Films attempted to inject new life into their Dracula formula by joining forces with one of Shaw Brothers' martial arts choreographers, Chang Cheh.[12] Shot entirely in Hong Kong at the Shaw Brothers studio and directed by Roy Ward Baker, the film attempted to bridge the Gothic horror Hammer was famed for to China's own tradition of mythological pictures and martial arts. For the producers, perhaps there was an analogy to be made between the hopping cadaver of the East and the vampire of Western lore. Stylistically, *Legends* is an awkward and intriguing blend of two distinct popular genres with long-standing ties in local literary and cinematic traditions. Ideologically, the film enacts, in the words of Leon Hunt, "a form of mythological colonization."[13] In the film's prologue, Dracula, living in Transylvania, is visited by Kah, a Chinese priest who asks his help in restoring the former glory of his Seven Golden Vampires, a cult of undead followers. Not only does Dracula refuse, he proceeds to inhabit the body of the priest and travel to China to rule over the cadavers himself. Through a brilliant lap dissolve, one sees their bodies merge. But before Dracula assumes the identity of his host, he announces, "I will take on your image, your mantle." What are we to make of this line? Is this an acknowledgement of British imperial history and unbalanced globalization more broadly speaking? Is this a self-reflexive gesture, a nod to the global flow of images and narratives that are at once locally specific, yet highly portable and marketable abroad? I would suggest that *Legends* essentially plays out the dynamics of an asymmetrical globalization by absorbing and appropriating the Chinese martial arts genre into its colonial narrative and re-marketing it for a Western audience. The film underscores the fact that certain mythological figures, the vampire being one, have cross-cultural resonance. Not only does the image of the vampire circulate globally through the medium of film, as archetype, it potentially taps into cultural anxieties over power, space and fear of the Other. As Ken Gelder notes, European vampire fictions have always shared an intimate connection to the travelogue; Bram Stroker's *Dracula,* framed as a document of the protagonist's travels and encounters with the vampire, is emblematic of this tradition.[14] Indeed Baker's film unfolds like a travelogue, albeit it is one that is inversely driven by Dracula's appropriation of the Chinese body and his transgression into Chinese space. Unlike the later *jiangshi* films made to suit local Hong Kong tastes, in *Legends,* Dracula is defeated neither by a Taoist priest nor through traditional martial arts. Instead, Van Helsing, while on a lecture tour in Guang Zhou is implored by seven kung fu fighting siblings to lead them in their battle against the fanged colonizer and his appropriated minions. The result is a Western-framed anthropological and touristic survey of Chinese culture, with kung fu as a familiarizing idiom.

Here, kung fu is effective in defeating the Chinese cadavers, but in the climactic (or rather anti-climactic) defeat of Dracula, it is Van Helsing who has the honor of driving a stake through his heart. Besides being useless against Dracula's colonizing and terroristic acts, for Hunt, *Legends'* exhibition of kung fu is "explicitly played out for a Western gaze."[15] After one of the more elaborate fight sequences, Van Helsing, as though speaking on behalf of the spectator, remarks, "it was the most fantastic display." While the film capitalizes on the spectacle of kung fu, the real agents and stars are Van Helsing and Dracula. In many regards, *Legends* is essentially a Dracula movie that appropriates and unfolds overtop of the image of Chinese culture, which in the 1970s was made portable and consumable in the kung fu film.

### Crazy Safari

Having looked at one *jiangshi* film, *Mr. Vampire,* that allegorically promotes a Chinese cultural nationalism and another, *Legends,* that reinscribes a narrative of Western imperialism, Hong Kong director Billy Chan introduced a further hybridization of the *jiangshi* film by harnessing an ethnographic gaze and syntax already established in a Western anthropological heritage. While the original Botswana-South African film, *The Gods Must Be Crazy,* is familiar to many, few people are aware that there are in fact four sequels, the last three of which were all made by Hong Kong directors. The first of these, *Crazy Safari,* is set primarily in the Kalahari desert and stars Gao, the Ju/'hoansi actor featured in the first two films directed by Jamie Uys. While both *Mr. Vampire* and *Legends* set up a binary between the West and the East, colonizer and colonized, *Crazy Safari* introduces a third term, or more literally a so-called Third World into the picture. Not only does Chan's film articulate forcefully the cultural nationalism present in *Mr. Vampire,* it channels this nationalism into a sentiment of cultural superiority by actively fetishizing a new space and body of an Other. Having retrieved the mummified body of his ancient *jiangshi* ancestor from London with the intention of giving it a proper burial in the homeland, a man from Hong Kong and an attendant Taoist priest find themselves stranded in the Kalahari desert after their plane runs out of gas. The *jiangshi* they send down by parachute and it miraculously lands in the vicinity of the same tribe of Bushmen (hereafter referred to as the San peoples) from the original *Gods* film. Gao's character, N!Xau, and his family proceed to worship the *jiangshi* that has fallen out of the sky after observing its effectiveness at frightening away a group of violent white South African diamond hunters. The film then spirals into a series of encounters with African animals, along with numerous amicable exchanges with the San as the Hong Kong character, Leo, and the Taoist priest attempt to locate and reclaim ownership over the *jiangshi.* The film ends with the two Chinese men successfully convincing the San to relinquish rights over the vampire, which they had up until this point gradually integrated into their culture. Before Leo and the priest leave, the two groups engage in an important act of cultural and material exchange, establishing a trade relationship that bypasses the authority of white neo-colonial power. I suggest that one can read *Crazy Safari* allegorically as an assertion of desire for Chinese global presence. Like the Coca-Cola bottle in the original *Gods* film that literally falls out of the sky to signal the arrival and intrusion of a Western capitalist order, the *jiangshi* lands in Africa as an announcement of an emerging and, by the film's logic, more empathetic Chinese presence. Through a spatialization of race and power relations, the film establishes a sympathetic view of African history by claiming a shared historical antagonism with white colonial power; at the same time, it articulates a Chinese cultural superiority that, in many ways, effaces any real gesture toward understanding and affiliation. Most importantly, however, it does all these things by adopting a pre-established representational framework originally conceived by Uys, whose own ideological position reflects an Afrikaner projection of nostalgia for a mythical, idyllic past. As Kenyan Tomaselli suggests, one must see the myths represented in the original *Gods* as having their origins in the real historic developments of the twentieth century:

> **Gods I is not a direct reflection of the apartheid ideology of the P.W. Botha era, but a symbolic integration of a variety of cultural, political, and economic myths which emerged throughout the Twentieth Century. Though presented as timeless, the origins of each myth—pastoralism, 'Bushmen,' Afrikaner and the city —can be identified in and through history, just as articulations within cinema and other media can be identified, dated, and explained in terms of maturing social discourses.[16]**

It is no doubt fascinating, then, how Chan manages to appropriate the cultural, political and economic myths established within the *Gods* franchise in order to promote an equally mythologizing account of Chinese nationalism.

Whereas the *jiangshi* in *Mr. Vampire* and the Chinese zombies in *Legends* are restricted in their movements to the geographic locale of China, in *Crazy Safari,* it serves as the vehicle by which the film introduces the spectator to other spaces and racialized groups; it operates as a kind of narrative agent (although one that is limited by the ultimate controlling power of the Taoist priest) and guides the film's ethnographic/touristic gaze, first to London and then to Africa. This gaze however, is more pronounced when fixed on black bodies than white bodies. The film frames the white British presence more as a competing agent than as an object of anthropological interest. It characterizes this presence as immoral, as having access to capital (cultural and monetary), and as associated with a history of colonialism. During the opening scene in the London auction house where Leo's ancestor is the next item up for bidding, the auctioneer calls on a Chinese intellectual to present a short lecture on the differences between Chinese and Eastern vampires. Through this campy use of a mock art historical slideshow, he illustrates the pop cultural knowledge that the spectator presumably already has. This East-West binary is further elaborated on and evaluated through the unsympathetic representation of the British. For the white bidders, the *jiangshi* is simply a commodity they hope to acquire via capital; for Leo — and by extension, a presumed Chinese spectator—the *jiangshi* is a connection to Chinese history. Leo and the priest manage to reclaim ownership over this cultural object not via money, but through their ability to literally raise the *jiangshi* and make it hop out of the auction house. Ownership is determined not through purchasing power, but through the ability to control the *jiangshi*'s movement, a skill available only to those with specialized (Chinese) knowledge.

Regarding the film's ethnographic function, it is important to note that while the narrative implies three geographic spaces—London, Africa, and Hong Kong—only two are represented. Hong Kong is the structuring absence that informs how the spectator is to interpret the two Other spaces. These two spaces are set in opposition, with Hong Kong as a third absent space, so that the touristic gaze may be more fully activated. When flying to Hong Kong from London, the film cuts to a view of a giant map indicating the plane's coordinates within and trajectory over the African continent. This cut effectively sutures the fantastic space of the fiction to a real cartographic representation of the earth, momentarily referencing the realm of the imaginary back to real geographic space. Additionally, as soon as Leo and the priest realize they have lost control over the plane's movements, they take out a compass in order to regain a mastery over the space below. The priest asserts and takes pride in the fact that the compass was a Chinese invention; unfortunately and to comedic effect, the compass malfunctions. Thus Crazy Safari, while continuously articulating this kind of cultural nationalism, also humours the characters' inability to actually orient themselves within the African landscape or affect any kind of overt power once outside their cultural context. The film, after all, positions them as accidental tourists and eyewitnesses to a pre-existing conflict between white South Africans and the San. Even the explicit mastery they attempt to claim via vision is farcical. In trying to locate the wayward jiangshi, Leo and the priest decide it would be effective to activate a "bird's eye view" of the landscape. Literally, they do so by attaching a parachute (and Leo) to a giant ostrich that the priest then rides and maneuvers. The inclusion of this panoramic view is worked (barely) into the narrative demands of the film; primarily, though, this view offers the spectator temporary and haphazard mastery over the space of Africa and grants a form of pleasure rooted in the visual language of tourism.

Having considered the way in which Crazy Safari creates racial and cultural hierarchies through its representation of geographic space, it is worth turning more explicitly to an analysis of the way in which geometric relations cement a rhetoric of Chinese cultural nationalism and superiority at the expense of the black body. Specifically the film uses what I refer to as "duels and dualities" in order to oust the presence of the white body as a third and unwelcome term; these "duels and dualities" represent moments of cultural exchange between the Chinese and the San and are construed as necessary alliances forged to displace white power. For the first half of the film, the narrative refers to historic antagonisms using a structure of binaries. The historic tension between the people of Hong Kong and the British is presented in parallel fashion to the "present" conflict between the San and the white South Africans (and their Zulu allies). Through this parallelism, Crazy Safari translates the history of South African conflict to beneficially reflect the Chinese as a potential partner and ally in a changing global order.

To elaborate on the film's restructuring of a binary relation that omits and undermines the presence of a white body, it is worth looking at two "duels," the first of which occurs near the film's end between the jiangshi and a Zulu zombie. Aside from the sheer spectacle of the two creatures engaged in stiff-armed battle, this moment significantly articulates Chinese cultural nationalism and asserts Chinese superiority over the African

body. Following the film's logic, these two pop cultural icons function as embodiments of Chinese and African nationalism respectively. Similar to a mock boxing match, the priest and a Zulu shaman prepare their respective fighters for entry into the ring. Intercutting between the two parties, the film establishes a dichotomy between the Zulu's and the Chinese. Their conflict is to be settled in the ring and both nations' cultural worth evaluated according to the strength of their representative monsters/technologies. Curiously, this is one of the only moments in Crazy Safari where the jiangshi affects any kind of autonomous agency. This agency is brought out through a series of incitements by Leo and the priest to represent Chinese culture; they shout at the jiangshi, "We're Chinese, we can't lose" and "You've insulted the Chinese. I don't know you." This is the moment in which the jiangshi assumes human qualities and sentiments, acting out of an abstract national pride and on behalf of a Chinese populace, both past and present. No doubt the film depicts this battle for comedic effect, but this scene is also a sentimental performance of Chinese cultural nationalism for the benefit of a Chinese spectator.

The second "duel" functions as a more explicit moment of cultural exchange. Here, cultural exchange is literally an exchange of signifiers wherein the "spirit" or "essence" representative of both Chinese culture and African culture is made to inhabit the body of the Other. This sequence, in its absurdity, is barely contained within the narrative frame and its significance is more symbolic than functional. Primarily, it is present to suggest that white neo-colonialism can literally be driven away via a mutual exchange of cultural signifiers between the San and the Chinese. This sequence unfolds according to a parallel structure. In the first scene, the Taoist priest, in order to help Leo in his battle against a Zulu shaman, transfers a baboon's spirit into his body. Leo miraculously performs a "monkey" style form of kung fu fighting and successfully defeats the shaman. In the even more elaborate second scene, the priest calls forth the spirit of Bruce Lee, raising it from a press photo and directing it to inhabit N!Xau's body as he fights off a number of Zulu warriors. By tapping the mythology and image of Lee, Crazy Safari also calls forth all the semiotic weight associated with Lee's body. In Legends, Hsi Ching and his siblings' kung fu fighting is performed uninterrupted and framed frontally by the camera for the spectatorial gaze of Van Helsing, and by extension, an imagined white spectator. Here, Lee's kung fu fighting is recast as a spectacle for the enjoyment of a Chinese viewer with assumed knowledge of Lee as a symbol of Chinese nationalism. N!Xau's body is possessed by Lee's spirit, yet the film chooses to show only despatialized footage of Lee fighting amidst a collage of abstract shapes and sounds; the spectacle of his movements offers the viewer direct visual pleasure without recourse to identification with any of the fictional characters, and thus facilitates a sense of privilege and pride. After this fantasmatic display of Lee's prowess, the camera cuts to show N!Xau's real body in real space flailing and jabbing in a parodic, rather than heroic, manner as if to reinforce the ultimate sanctity and primacy of Lee's spirit. This sequence, wherein a baboon's spirit is equated with Africaness and Bruce Lee's with that of Chineseness, is no doubt problematic. It suggests the essence of Africa as primal and animalistic, whereas the essence of China is mediated and absolutely embedded in culture. Not only does this parallel exchange establish a rhetoric of Chinese cultural superiority,

it posits this exchange as a necessary and effective means by which to defeat white power.

In pitting white power as a historic (for the Chinese) and present oppressor (for the Kalahari San), the film suggests that Chinese and Africans can, through cultural and spiritual exchange, join forces to redefine power relations with past and present white colonial bodies. This gesture presents the Chinese as an equitable trading partner by suggesting that they share an "essential" historic, if not cultural, sameness. Significantly, after a series of spiritual and cultural exchanges that effectively oust the white body as a competing term, the two groups engage in material exchange. Upon leaving the desert, the priest offers N!Xau a set of *jiangshi* and Taoist priest robes, and the *jiangshi* is seen leaving dressed in garbs of animal skins. The clothes serve as signifiers if not of cultural authenticity, then at least of the exchangeability of such signifiers. As a parting gift, N!Xau gives the priest a bag of diamonds. This gift is integral to *Crazy Safari's* attempt to posit Chinese presence as a legitimate and ethical trading partner. The film ends with a scene of N!Xau dressed in the robes of the Taoist priest, training a figure clothed in the *jiangshi*'s robes. This final scene functions to imply that both parties are satisfied with having encountered each other as cultural ambassadors and potential trading partners.

No doubt it is worth pursuing a closer reading of *Crazy Safari* in relation to Uys's original *Gods* films in order to compare the different ideological positions that each director stakes out at the expense of the San. While this line of inquiry deserves development, by inscribing *Crazy Safari* within a tradition of *jiangshi* films, one can also see how a cinematic articulation of Chinese cultural nationalism might be mobilized not only as a critique of Western imperialism, but as an outright projection of Chinese power in a changing global order. Rightly so, one might interpret *Crazy Safari's* cultural nationalism as a veiled expression of Chinese cultural imperialism. Considering Appadurai's insistence that the imagination is a form of social practice, it is appropriate to investigate precisely whose imagination *Crazy Safari* speaks to and to what end. *Crazy Safari* translates a South African film in order to have it apply specifically to Chinese concerns; by the same token, it translates San culture to support Chinese cultural interests. The film harnesses and, in many ways, subverts the ethnographic intentions of the original *Gods* format in order to frame Chinese presence in Africa as a possibility. Significantly, it omits any mention of past Chinese presence in the region or the forms of material and cultural exchanges that have already occurred between the two nations. By doing so, it imagines a "fresh" introduction to African culture, one that is as equally paternalistic and opportunistic as Uys's films were. Nonetheless, when viewed as a fragment of a global mediascape, the film articulates an imagined world through which a Hong Kong and diasporic population might come to terms with the territory's historic and then-pending relations with China. By the same gesture, through a retranslation of the *Gods* ethnographic structure, it engages in a process of self-representation that casts China as an agent capable of replacing Western influence in a post-colonial world order.

In relation to mediascapes, Appadurai suggests that "scripts can and do get disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live...they help constitute narratives of the Other and protonarratives of possible lives, fantasies that could

become prolegomena to the desire for acquisition and movement.[17] As a narrative of the Other and a protonarrative of future movements, *Crazy Safari* foreshadows China's anticipated presence in the African continent. Most recently, this presence has been interpreted in the West as a threat. A recent BBC article, "China in Africa: Developing Ties—Friend or Foe?" paints budding Sino-African relations as a sinister form of Chinese economic and cultural exploitation disguised within a rhetoric of *tianxia*:

> **The Chinese insist they are not interested in dominating Africa. Instead China says it seeks a "harmonious world", an evolution of its Cold War search for "peaceful co-existence", and it wants to coax African countries along the path towards development. Instead of top-down aid projects, Chinese companies seek profits in Africa as they bequeath the continent a new infrastructure - one that will more than likely be used to increase trade with China.[18]**

The article, in warning the West of China's seemingly disinterested presence, posits its own version of world affairs. As multiple competing and supplementary texts that contribute to a global mediascape, news articles such as this one, along with *jiangshi* films and the internet fan sites that promote them, offer glimpses of the way in which the imagination exists as a form of social practice. Not only do *jiangshi* films construct fantastic worlds capable of facilitating ties between local and diasporic Chinese populations, they serve as vehicles for commenting, contesting, and projecting narratives of past and future global relations. By tracing the evolution of this popular and somewhat understudied genre, one can see how mythologies of national and transnational identities develop and exist in dialogical relation to other media texts and their attendant ideologies.

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Notes
1    eHow, "How to Defeat a Chinese Vampire," http://www.ehow.com/how_2144443_defeat-chinese-hopping-vampire.html
2    Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong: The Extra Dimension* (London: BFI Publishing, 1996), 219.
3    Ibid. 207.
4    Ibid. 207.
5    Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 31.
6    Ibid. 35.
7    Teo, 111.
8    Ibid. 111.
9    Ibid. 111.
10   Ibid. 111.
11   There are six in total, all made between 1985–1990.
12   I.Q. Hunter, "*The Legend of the 7 Golden Vampires*," *Postcolonial Studies* 3:1 (2000): 82.
13   Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters: From Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 164.
14   Ken Gelder, *Reading the Vampire* (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.
15   Hunt, 165.
16   Kenyan G. Tomaselli, "Rereading *The God's Must Be Crazy*," *Visual Anthropology* 19:2 (2006): 184.
17   Appadurai, 35–36.
18   BBC, "China in Africa: Developing Ties," http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7086777.stm

# Second City
## or Second Country?

### THE QUESTION OF CANADIAN IDENTITY
### IN *SCTV'S* TRANSCULTURAL TEXT

ERIN HANNA

**Take off, eh?**

When *SCTV* began broadcasting its programming day on September 21, 1976, Canadian viewers were introduced to a new brand of television satire that would develop and grow with the show for its eight-year run. Between 1976 and 1984, *SCTV* moved from a local Canadian television station, to North American syndication, to American network television and, finally, to pay-TV. The show was composed of a series of sketches woven together with recurring characters and behind-the-scenes narratives about the machinations of a fictional television network called SCTV.

Though *SCTV* satirized and parodied American popular culture, two of the show's most successful characters were Bob and Doug McKenzie (Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas), simple-minded Canadian brothers whose primary interests in life included beer, back bacon, and finding "topics" for their two-minute show, "Great White North." The McKenzie Brothers were a huge sensation in Canada.[1] Most tellingly, in 1981, an Ottawa fan nominated Moranis and Thomas for the Order of Canada for their contribution to "our cultural sense of identity."[2] In 1982, Thomas and Moranis produced the comedy album *Great White North*, which sold 350,000 records in Canada and made the Billboard top ten in the U.S.[3] The pair even wrote, directed, and starred in a 1983 film featuring the two characters, *Strange Brew*. Though it received mixed reviews, *Strange Brew* has since become a cult classic in North America and the brothers are still intimately connected with Canadian identity.[4]

In "How to Get a Mouse in Your Beer Bottle" (1982), Rick Salutin argued that the tradition of Canadian entertainers who imitate "a certain typical Canadian style" for laughs was nothing new, but that Thomas and Moranis did not fall into the same tradition of "Canadian self-putdown."[5] Salutin saw the pair differently. There was a degree of pride in what they did and they appealed to an audience who may have seen themselves in Bob and Doug or simply enjoyed emulating them.[6] Although Salutin celebrates the McKenzie Brothers for their Canadian everyman quality, at the heart of these two characters is a more rebellious streak. The story behind the popular duo is that Bob and Doug were conceived as a response to Canadian content demands made during *SCTV*'s run on CBC

and in U.S. syndication.[7] The CBC had fewer commercials breaks than American television, so *SCTV*'s writers were asked to fill two extra minutes in Canada. Because of Canadian broadcast regulations, the CBC asked that *SCTV* fill this time with content that was distinctly Canadian. In an interview for the *Chicago Tribune*, Rick Moranis describes their reaction, "We thought this was ridiculous. Granted we grew up dominated by American culture and we love satirizing it, but we do the show in Canada, we write it here, we're Canadians—how can they ask us to be more Canadian?"[8] In an article for *Newsweek*, Dave Thomas explains that their intention in creating Bob and Doug was to make "a satiric statement on what happens when you try to make entertainment a nationalistic issue."[9] Often masked by the McKenzie Brothers' wider popularity, is the fact that their very inception came from the desire to ridicule Canadian content regulations. What was meant to be a sarcastic snipe at the CBC became a North American phenomenon.

In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990), Stuart Hall describes two notions of cultural identity: one is founded on the similarities of a shared past[10] and the other is constituted by difference and made up of "ruptures and discontinuities."[11] Hall's description points to the way in which cultural identity is continually being negotiated. It is "a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation."[12] This fluid notion of identity is key to understanding *SCTV*'s representation of Canada in a transcultural context.

As signifiers of Canadian identity, Bob and Doug McKenzie play on these notions of similarities and difference. The characters draw attention to and complicate the production and representation of national identity. In a Canadian context, Bob and Doug are a satirical portrayal of the essentialization that comes with a national identity imposed from above. The ensuing celebration of this comic representation of identity in extra-textual discourse also created a feeling of national identity and unity founded not on intervention by the state, but, as Margaret Atwood puts it, by using humour "as a weapon."[13] In this way, national identity is at once critiqued and reified through an assertion of difference. Bob and Doug are a representation of a folksy identity associated with local Canadian communities, which questions the validity of the top-down imposition of a

national identity by Canada's federal government.

Likewise, *SCTV* negotiates the similarities and differences, which constitute notions of Canadian identity. As an independently produced show, *SCTV* worked with, but not within, the government-regulated world of Canadian broadcasting. Through its ongoing satire and parody of American television, *SCTV* played with the sense of difference that Canadians often use to identify themselves in relation to the U.S. In the same way that Ted Madger reflected that he felt more Canadian watching "violent American television" than when watching *Anne of Green Gables*,[14] *SCTV* fortified a sense of identity through a critical distance from American culture.

The production of Canadian identity through difference is altered somewhat with *SCTV*'s success on American television. *SCTV* represented another kind of comedic identity, one that set it apart from *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*, 1975-present), which was seen as losing its satiric edge.[15] Through its distanced critique of American television, *SCTV* became a point of comparison to *SNL*. In this way, critics who shared a love of Canada's *SCTV* differentiated it from the decreasing quality of American late-night comedy.

Taken as discrete contexts of reception, *SCTV*'s 'Canadianness' caries different significance for Canadians and Americans. The rise of cable and satellite technologies in the 1970s led to an even greater sharing of culture between Canada and the U.S. This sharing of culture meant that Americans and Canadians had and have a set of common cultural references from which to draw. *SCTV*, then, can be read as a transcultural text that provides a space for the development and overlap of Canadian, American and North American identities. What remains consistent in every context are the representations of a Canadian cultural and national identity.[16] The way this identity plays out on *SCTV* and in Canadian and American media discourse reflects Hall's assertion that identity is "a production" that is "always in progress."[17]

### "*SCTV* is on the air!"

Although *SCTV* is a Canadian show, its roots in the Second City in Chicago point to a more hybridized identity. In 1973, Second City founder, Bernie Sahlins, held auditions for a Toronto offshoot of his successful American comedy troupe and the franchise rights were sold to Toronto entrepreneur Andrew Alexander a year later. A number of Canadian Second City performers—John Candy, Eugene Levy, Dave Thomas, Catherine O'Hara and Martin Short—later became *SCTV* cast members. Only two performers—Andrea Martin and Joe Flaherty–were American. Other core cast members of Second City included Gilda Radner and Dan Ackroyd, who both went on to star in *Saturday Night Live* when it premiered in 1975.

*SCTV*'s later rivalry with *SNL* was due, in part, to their shared Second City heritage. After the departure of Ackroyd and Radner, Alexander feared that the U.S. networks would begin to poach the rest of his cast. The impetus for creating *SCTV* was to keep his Toronto troupe together. The first 52 episodes ran on Global Television between 1976 and 1979 and in 1977, the show made its way to the U.S. in syndication.[18] Whenever possible, *SCTV* was aired before or after *Saturday Night Live* in order to capitalize on the American show's popularity. By 1979, Global announced that they could no longer afford to produce *SCTV*. The final episode aired on Global on March 3,

1979, but *SCTV* continued in syndication for the next year and a half, airing on the CBC in Canada.

When Alexander was shopping *SCTV* in the U.S. in 1977, he approached Frank Silverman, then president of ABC. Silverman rejected the show, arguing that, "the troupe was 'far too intelligent' for network distribution."[19] Silverman's comment illustrates that from its earliest days, *SCTV* produced a feeling of difference, even sophistication, in its comedy, which reinforced a sense of Canadian cultural identity as distinct from America. By 1981, Fred Silverman was working at NBC and ready to reconsider. With producer Lorne Michaels leaving *Saturday Night Live*, the show's future was uncertain and, as Robbins points out in his program guide to *SCTV*, "NBC needed quality programming—the night of *SCTV*'s premiere, NBC's primetime lineup included the movie *The Harlem Globetrotters on Gilligan's Island*."[20] *SCTV*'s success in syndication was enough to prompt Silverman to take a chance on the show. New episodes were produced for NBC and began airing as *SCTV Network 90*, in May of 1981. The show ran for three seasons on NBC, airing on Fridays after *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* (1962-1992), from 12:30 to 2:00 a.m. This late timeslot became part of the discourse around *SCTV*'s sophistication and difference. As Howard Rosenberg lamented, it was "almost as if the network had decided terrific satire only works when the audience is asleep."[21]

One of the biggest changes that accompanied this move to the American network was the shift from a thirty-minute to a ninety-minute show. While *SCTV* was produced for NBC, the show continued on the CBC in Canada with the ninety-minute episodes trimmed to an hour-long format. In an attempt to make the show more like the New York-produced *Saturday Night Live*, NBC's suggested incorporating musical guests, and *SCTV* often did so quite successfully. The network's requests that they begin to write sketches to include "more youth-oriented drug humor," were rejected.[22] Although *SNL* increasingly turned to drug humor in order to attract a younger audience, *SCTV* distinguished itself by avoiding this sensibility, thus embracing a more straight-laced humor and refusing to "play down to the audience."[23] In the second and third seasons, the show's sophistication was rewarded with thirteen Emmy nominated episodes, and two Emmys for best writing.[24]

In May of 1983, NBC announced its plans to cancel *SCTV* due to high production costs and low ratings. Andrew Alexander was unwilling to take NBC's offer of a special pilot that would test the waters in prime time, as he was worried about compromising the show's future syndication value.[25] Instead, Alexander announced that in the summer of 1983, *SCTV* would move to Cinemax in the U.S. and Canada's newly launched Superchannel. Given *SCTV*'s niche appeal in the U.S. and the increasing fragmentation of North American television audiences, it seems only logical that the show would eventually end up on pay-TV. For Cinemax and Superchannel, the assumption was that by incorporating original programming like *SCTV* into their schedule of repurposed Hollywood films, they would be able to "target a younger, more upscale audience."[26] *SCTV*'s identity, having been established in syndication and on network television, ultimately became a branding strategy at a time when pay-TV was becoming an increasingly important player in the television industry. The show began

airing on November 22, 1983, with two forty-five minute episodes each month. After a year on pay-TV, *SCTV* ended its run in 1984.

## Humouring Canadians

In her article "Canadian Humour in the Media, Exporting John Candy and Importing Homer Simpson" (1996), Beverly Rasporich cites Henri Bergson's famous essay, *Laughter* (1956). "Our laughter," he argues, "is always the laughter of a group."[27] Bergson goes on to describe a "kind of complicity" that occurs between "laughers, real or imaginary."[28] Using Bergson's metaphor of the parish, Rasporich identifies the ways that humour works to strengthen and shape Canadian national identity, forming a kind of "community glue" that "brings the country together in the country's interest."[29] At the national level, Canada's "parish of humour" is most closely associated with "a rich tradition of political caricature, comedy and satire" less prevalent in American comedy.[30]

In the case of *SCTV*, the satire is rarely overtly political. For example, it is not necessary to know about the context of Canadian content regulation to laugh at the McKenzie brothers. But understanding this context adds to the comedy a distinctly satirical edge. In this way, the interpretation of *SCTV*'s Canadian satire hinges on a culturally specific kind of knowledge and experience. However, when drawing on and satirizing American influences, the show also accesses a shared North American culture. This begs the question: how can a text that draws so heavily on American culture be read in the context of Canadian identity?

The answer may lie in the way that humour shapes Canadian identity by providing a means to resist outside cultural forces. Canada's proximity to the United States, both geographically and culturally, has been a concern when it comes to Canadian identity. The fact that Americans have often been identified as a "potential threat to Canadian national sovereignty," has made America and Americans the frequent "butt in the humour of the [Canadian] nation."[31] By acknowledging the threat through humour, this anxiety is transformed into cathartic release. The comedy, however, belies what Rasporich calls an "undeniable attraction"[32] to American culture.

In *On Location* (2005), Tinic builds on Rasporich's argument. She cites satire and parody as ways "that Canadians have negotiated a negative sense of identity, defining themselves through who they are not."[33] The interplay between the resistance and attraction to American culture is part of Canada's complicated relationship with the U.S. For Canadians, humour has frequently provided the most successful critiques of American culture.[34] Conversely, comedy has also provided many Canadian performers with crossover success in the U.S.[35] This is certainly true in the case of *SCTV*. While the show operated out of Canada, many of the performers were traveling back and forth to the U.S., trying to build careers in the American film industry.[36] This connection between Canadian comedy and American culture represents a negotiation of a simultaneous desire for difference and similarity. By taking America as a comedic topic, Canadians can distance themselves from the culture, while still subscribing to the ideology that Hollywood is central to constructing a successful career. Canadian audiences and performers, then, are faced with a degree of ambivalence. This ambivalence, as we will see,

plays out in the reception of *SCTV* and in the show's representation of Canadian and American culture.

In the case of *SCTV*'s satire of American media, the humour functions in multiple ways. At a time when cable and satellite television was opening up an increasing number of literal and metaphorical channels for the import of American culture into Canada, *SCTV* provided an antidote to anxiety about this invasion of Canadian airwaves. As the first Canadian show to be produced for U.S. network television, *SCTV* had the benefit of being a show primarily about television. In this way, *SCTV* "appeal[ed] to a larger audience: everyone is aware of the context of television, and everyone gets the jokes."[37] In Canada, however, the "jokes" were being made at the expense of American culture. Although *SCTV*'s approach was to take the guise of an American television station, the distance and satire that characterized the humour had strong ties to Canada's comedic identity. Yet the show also satirized Canadian media in sketches and incorporated a host of references to Canadian locations, celebrities and characters, illustrating what Rasporich calls Canadians' "ongoing need to see themselves specifically reflected back, as Canadians, in humour."[38] By lampooning encroaching American media while referencing and satirizing Canadian culture, *SCTV* formed the kind of "community glue"[39] Rasporich describes.

## "Who cares where it pays taxes?": Framing Canadian identity in a cross-border context I

*SCTV*'s critical success in Canada and the U.S. led to a wide range of responses. In Canada, *SCTV* was frequently celebrated for being a Canadian production. However, as a privately funded show with ties to America,[40] the degree to which *SCTV* could be considered Canadian was sometimes a contentious issue. Was the comedy produced in the show Canadian enough? Did the tone of the humor reflect a distinctly Canadian sensibility? Did the fact that the show drew on American media matter as long as the show was funny?

In a 1978 column for *The Toronto Star*, Dennis Braithwaite laments English-speaking Canada's lacklustre cultural identity, which he says is comprised of "left-overs from American culture."[41] According to Braithwaite, *SCTV* is un-Canadian. "The skits," he says, "are all on American subjects, or simply neutral shafts at the human condition."[42] He argues that because *SCTV* is in syndication in the U.S., the show's producers try to avoid alienating American viewers with content that might identify the show as Canadian. Braithwaite even goes as far as to suggest that many Canadians viewers "are unaware that it's a Canadian show," which, he says, "would account for its good ratings and beaucoup sponsors."[43] This comment speaks to a key anxiety provoked by the influx of American popular culture to Canada: that enjoying American popular culture would preclude the enjoyment of Canadian culture or even transform Canadian culture, so that it was no longer recognizable as Canadian.

However, Braithwaite ignores the degree to which Canadians concern themselves with American culture. *SCTV* was not simply a show on "American subjects."[44] By approaching American culture through a comedic lens, *SCTV* produced a reflection that did not match the original. Laughing at this distorted reflection of American media, Canadians could use these "left-overs from American culture"[45] to strengthen their

own cultural identity. "When Americans watch TV," SCTV's Martin Short explained in 1993, "they're watching TV, but when Canadians watch TV, they're watching American TV."[46] Short's observation speaks to the importance of humour in the discussion of SCTV's identity as a Canadian text. Although its target is often American culture, SCTV's satirical take comes from a space of distance. The comedy is very much about the experience of being Canadian and being both a part of and apart from American culture.

Braithwaite was not the only Canadian critic to engage with the question of SCTV's identity as a Canadian text. In two Toronto Star articles published in November 1981, after the show was picked up by NBC, the authors debate the merits of SCTV as a Canadian show. In the first, "That Second City gang on SCTV is okay, eh?," Martin O'Malley celebrates SCTV's Canadian identity. "I feel like a winner," O'Malley writes, "For once, finally, as a Canadian, I feel I could hop a plane to New York and be welcome at any of the great bashes or elegant dinner parties just for wearing a toque and saying 'Okay, eh?'"[47] While many have described SCTV as a blend of U.S. and Canadian humor, O'Malley says, "there's something solidly Canadian about it, something zany and self-deprecating," which he attributes, tongue in cheek, to "the heritage of always trying so hard and always coming second."[48] This notion of coming second was not foreign to the cast of SCTV.

In an earlier 1981 Toronto Star article, John Candy spoke to an American reporter about his impressions of the Canadian reception of SCTV. "We have to keep explaining to Canadians why we haven't left for Hollywood, because that's the hallmark of success... We really made it [in Canada] when NBC picked us up here."[49] "SCTV," he says, "should stand for Second Country."[50] Expressing the feeling that Canadians are "used to being considered second rate,"[51] Candy voices his frustration with Canada's "undeniable attraction"[52] to the American entertainment industry.

This feeling of being second is not only a key aspect of Canadian identity, but also key to the transcultural history of SCTV and its formation around Second City. In the second Toronto Star article, "Stars and Stripes true SCTV colors" Slinger responded to O'Malley's celebration of SCTV's Canadian identity, arguing that the show is as American as can be and citing the name "Second City" and its reference to Chicago.[53] The name "Second City" originated in a series of articles by A.J. Liebling and published in The New Yorker during the early 50s. Liebling compared Chicago to other metropolises in the world, arguing that it lacked some of the culture of a city like New York.[54] The Chicago comedy troupe named their theatre "Second City" in response to the notion that Chicago was "a cultural vacuum."[55] This feeling of coming in second, then, is not particular to the Canadian identity. Rather, it is part of a larger dynamic that exists, in the case of Second City, between different localities in a nation and, in the case of SCTV, between nations in a more global context. This notion of being second is a facet of the Canadian identity that grows out of the dynamic of competition between Canada and the United States, just as Chicago became "second city" in relation to New York.

"SCTV," Slinger writes, "is a cunningly contrived package designed almost exclusively for consumption in the United States—it gives a little knowing wink to its Canadian connection; most of the actors worked at the Toronto branch of Second City—but it has been dressed in the Stars and Stripes because the big bucks are down there, south of the 49th parallel."[56] While Slinger does allow that the show contains Canadian references, he describes them as "Canadian residue" which consists of familiar locations or street names.[57] Despite his cynical take on SCTV's Canadian heritage, he concludes that, "If something makes us laugh, who cares where it pays taxes?"[58] These articles are demonstrative of the conflicting notions about how the show can or should be read by Canadians. The show's comedy may be celebrated, but, ultimately, discussions of the way this comedy operates are used to argue for reasons why the show can or cannot be considered Canadian. It is SCTV's humour that functions to reassert Canadian identity, even as the show is surrounded by and draws upon numerous U.S. influences

## Comedy that "wears the maple leaf": Framing Canadian identity in a cross-border context II

In Canada, SCTV's success was frequently framed by its warm reception south of the border. "Our American cousins," a Winnipeg Free Press article proclaimed, "know that these days, the best comedy is that which wears the maple leaf."[59] The news that SCTV would be broadcast on NBC seemed to reaffirm Canadian confidence in the show. Critic Jim Bawden described the struggles of Canadians who "have spent a lot of years and wasted effort trying to land a spot on American television" by disguising their Canadian origins.[60] SCTV, he said, is "the first all-Canadian effort to get its first U.S. network slot." Writing for The Globe and Mail, Rick Groen declared, "for the first time, a home grown product labeled SCTV crossed the border to thrash the Yanks on their own turf."[61] These reviews celebrate the show's American success while also maintaining the distinction between Canadian and American culture. This speaks to the frequently ambivalent attitude towards U.S. culture that Rasporich and Tinic identify in their discussion of Canadian comedy.

That SCTV was called a "success story for Canadian TV"[62] is also significant, as the show's earlier incarnation was cancelled on the Canadian network, Global Television. At the time of its cancellation, Global said they could no longer afford to produce the show. However, the network was also broadcasting an increasing number of U.S. shows and the focus on Canadian content was being shifted to news programming.[63] This celebration of SCTV as a Canadian success story, despite Canadian television's inability to sustain the show, is indicative of a shift in Canadian cultural policy in the 1970s, from supporting the production of culture in Canada, to an emphasis on building culture industries that would sell Canadian culture in Canada and the rest of the world.[64] The result was that the content produced under this model was often made to resemble "foreign works" with the hopes of increasing the possibility of international distribution.[65] In light of this desire to create marketable cultural products, it is logical that Canadian culture industries would model some content on work produced in the United States, the most successful culture industry in the world. The importance of the SCTV's American success, as expressed in the Canadian media signals that, for better or worse, Canadian cultural expression was shifting towards a model based on industrial and economic prosperity.

"Successful" representations of Canada were those that gained recognition outside of the country.

In the year after Slinger's critique was published, *SCTV* aired an episode that placed a great deal of emphasis on the show's Canadian roots. "Sammy Maudlin 23rd Anniversary/CBC" (November 5, 1982), took its inspiration from the NFL strike that began in September 1982, when, in an attempt to fill the gaps left by missing games, NBC aired Canadian broadcasts from the CFL (Canadian Football League). In this episode, *SCTV*'s janitors declare a strike, shutting down the network. Desperate for a solution, Guy Caballero (Joe Flaherty) contacts station manager Edith Prickly (Andrea Martin), who is on vacation with Prime Minister Trudeau in New York. Upon hearing mention of Trudeau, Caballero has a moment of inspiration and decides to pick up a feed from the CBC. This, he believes, will save him from having to show reruns, a move sure to incite a backlash from viewers.[66] While the remainder of the episode satirizes CBC television and Canadian film, the larger, formal logic of the show mocked NBC's attempt to introduce Canadian football to an American audience. In this way, the episode deals with specifically Canadian content while also situating itself in a larger, North American context.

The CBC content begins with a series of short sketches. The first is an uncanny parody of "Hinterland Who's Who," a series of 60-second informational shorts produced by the Canadian Wildlife service.[67] Following "Hinterland" is a "Monday Night Curling" promo and "It's a Canadian fact," the latter of which recurs throughout the episode. The Canadian facts are explanations of cultural differences between the U.S. and Canada, skewed towards a Canadian bias. For example, one "Canadian fact" proclaims, "Canadians celebrate Thanksgiving at the beginning of October and yet Americans celebrate their Thanksgiving at the end of November. That means we must have invented it because we celebrate it first." Following the "Canadian fact" is an ad for "Moose beer," whose tagline is "the one beer you can't get in the States." While the first two sketches operate as very resonant parodies, the latter two are satirical comments on attempts to define Canadian identity in opposition to American culture. Within the context of these very specific parodies of Canadian television, *SCTV* also presents a meta-commentary about the ways Canadians struggle to identify themselves in relation to and against American culture.

The longest sketch in the Canadian segment of the show is based on the Canadian film *Goin' Down the Road* (Shebib, 1970). The film and the *SCTV* sketch tell the story of two men from Cape Breton who travel to Toronto in search of prosperity. Instead, they discover that Toronto does not offer the endless opportunities they had hoped to find. Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* embodied what Chris Byford identifies as the frequently described "loser paradigm" in Canadian film.[68] As Byford notes, this interpretation of the East Coast characters as an embodiment of a marginalized Canadian loser is problematic in its negative representation of Maritime identities.[69] However, the relationship between the East Coast and Toronto in the film has also been said to represent "Canada's perpetual younger brother role to the United States."[70] Byford's discussion of the film even extends to the *SCTV* parody. He notes the way that Flaherty and Candy's portrayal of the characters who, in the *SCTV* version, leave their jobs in the Maritimes to find "docterin' and lawyerin'" jobs in Toronto, adds to the film's "already ridiculous" representation of Maritimers.[71]

*SCTV*'s *Goin' Down the Road* parody ridicules the division between Toronto and the East Coast, while also drawing attention to broader Canadian stereotypes. In one scene, the performers purposely emphasize the Canadian accent through lines like, "There's a *mouse* in the *house*," and "what's life all *about*." Here, the relationship and cultural differences between Toronto and the East Coast are transposed onto a larger cultural difference between Canadian and American accents. In the context of Canadian reception, the significance of *SCTV*'s *Goin' Down the Road* takes on a more localized meaning; in a North American context, the parody becomes about national differences. Significantly, the interplay between Canadian film and American media is emphasized at the end of the sketch. When the fictional credits role, viewers are reminded that it was "filmed entirely on location in Canada, by Canadians, for Canadians," while the following title card reveals that the film was "distributed by American International Films." The recognition of this tension between the desire to claim cultural content for Canada and the dream of successful reception in the U.S. not only resonates in the context of the Canadian film industry but is also key to *SCTV*'s production in Canada and its successful deployment to the United States.

## "Bye bye Big Apple, hello *SCTV*": Canadian Identity Crosses Over

Another transcultural concern was *SCTV*'s satirical take on American television during a time when *SNL*, once a forum for those "who felt disenfranchised and alienated by television," had "lost much of its satirical sharpness."[72] *SCTV*'s satire appealed to critics who were increasingly underwhelmed by *SNL*'s offerings. When *SCTV* aired on NBC in 1981, it joined *SNL* and ABC's *Fridays* in the "late night comedy wars." American critics celebrated *SCTV* as "sophisticated satire"[73] and "the smartest 90 minutes on any TV channel,"[74] and for every positive review of *SCTV* came an inevitable comparison to the decline of *SNL*. One critic called *Saturday Night Live* "an unqualified disaster,"[75] and several called for *SCTV* to replace *SNL* on Saturdays at 11:30.[76] When *SCTV* signed with NBC, *SNL* was already in decline.[77] The show, some said, had begun to pander to the network's desire to reach the lowest common denominator. They "started to become what they were supposed to be ridiculing."[78] Even the cast and writers on *SCTV* picked up on *SNL*'s shortcomings. A 1980 episode featured a sketch called "Thursday Night Live," which poked fun at *SNL*'s obsession with drug humour.

The general consensus was that *SNL* tried too hard to be "Big City Hip,"[79] while *SCTV* had the advantage of being removed from the New York and Los Angeles comedy scenes. This distinction was even noted in the opening credits of *SCTV*'s first episodes for NBC. Giving viewers some semblance of a back-story, Dave Thomas, as the announcer, explained that the cast members of *SCTV* had been,

> **Summoned by a force that none of them were able to resist. They were sent to New York City, the entertainment capital of the world, and showered with adulation and attention. They were given the red carpet treatment and ushered into the highest executive offices. They were given contracts to put SCTV back**

in business. But, abruptly, they were told to get the hell out of New York. The Big Apple just doesn't cut to hicks. Here's your bus boys. Yes, it was bye bye Big Apple, hello SCTV.

This introduction distances SCTV from SNL, both geographically and ideologically. It clearly marks the SCTV cast as outsiders to the world of New York, Hollywood, and urban culture in general. This is a revealing strategy given that SCTV's most successful syndication was in "sophisticated urban markets."[80] It may be that SCTV's outsider status provided the kind of distance and critique that SNL had, at that time, failed to provide. In the context of SCTV's presence on American television, the same kind of marginalized identity that distanced the Canadian show from American culture became a signifier of difference in the discourse about SNL's decline.

Ironically, the assertion of difference and distance from American culture that contributed to the formation of a Canadian identity also strengthened a sense of identity for US viewers watching SCTV. Whether directly associated with the show's 'Canadianness' or its general distance from urban, hipster culture, this outsider status gave SCTV a distinct appeal to young American viewers. At an SCTV tribute during the 1999 Aspen Comedy Festival, Tonight Show host Conan O'Brien told the story of how he discovered SCTV and described his incredulous response to SCTV's Canadian origins, "at the time it was just, 'what are you talking about? They don't make things in Canada. We make things and send it to them.'" Despite his initial skepticism, the show "literally changed [his] life." Unlike the other shows "being rammed down your throat," SCTV was an exiting discovery for the young O'Brien, "This is something I know about, my parents don't know about. This is my show."[81]

O'Brien's reflection is important to understanding how SCTV functions as a Canadian text in an American context. The aspects of the show's satire and comedy that identify it as Canadian, its distanced critique of American culture and its underdog status on American network television made the show appealing to a niche American audience. By watching this show, certain viewers were able to locate their tastes in opposition to television comedy like SNL that had become too mainstream. The distinction is, in many ways, a matter of the local within a larger, transcultural context. As Canadians struggled to define themselves as different from the U.S., fans of SCTV in Canada and America wished that U.S. television could be more like SCTV.

**Still looking for "Topics": Conclusion**
With ties to Canada and the United States, SCTV's overlapping contexts of reception make it an interesting text to consider alongside issues of Canadian identity. During its production and broadcast on Canadian and American television, the show dealt with the specificities of Canadian culture and identity while locating Canada in a larger, transcultural context. By presenting images of Canadian and American culture in concert, SCTV painted a realistic picture of the way in which North America was moving towards increasingly common cultural points of reference. However, it is within these similarities and commonalities that differences also need to be emphasized. As a Canadian production engaging with American television, SCTV did not represent, as was often the fear, an evacuation of

Canadian culture in favour of U.S. popular culture. Rather, the show mediated this culture within a discourse of satire and parody, emphasizing, for Canadians, the different experience of watching American television from a Canadian vantage point. SCTV was a reflection of U.S. culture, but one that provided frequent reminders of what it meant to be Canadian.

Concluding with Bob and Doug McKenzie, SCTV's most popular and most explicitly Canadian characters, is particularly apt. In the SCTV episode "The Great White North Palace" (April 16, 1982), a behind the scenes narrative plays on the real-life success of the McKenzie brothers. Station owner Guy Caballero decides to capitalize on the success of Bob and Doug through merchandizing and a prime time special. Naturally, the brothers agree with Caballero's plan. The resulting special, "Great White North Palace," plays out with all the obligatory glitz and glamour. When Bob and Doug make their entrance in glittering tuxes and bouffant hairstyles, they make an effort to read the cue cards, but lapse into their usual unscripted banter until they are dragged off the stage and (the real) Tony Bennett performs in their place. After another botched sketch, Caballero pulls the plug.

Reflecting on their aborted special Doug says, "You know what? We got hosed. First we had this little show, which was beauty and we loved, eh? Then we had this big show. And now we got no show." The incongruity of seeing Bob and Doug McKenzie hosting a network special is hilarious, but Doug's reflection on their downfall is somewhat poignant. Having found the remnants of their old set, the brothers sit, drinking beer. When Tony Bennett appears, he tells them that he was disappointed by the special. He had hoped to appear on "Great White North" as a "topic." Bob and Doug decide to do an episode of their show with Bennett. Although they know there are no cameras filming, the brothers shrug it off: "Isn't that always the way, that the best things in life happen when you have no way of recording it?" Of course, this is a reflexive moment, as SCTV viewers have watched the mock show unfold.

In tracing the rise and fall of the McKenzie brothers in this episode, SCTV produces a rather negative impression of the appropriation of Canadian culture for capitalist (read American) gain. Again, SCTV produces a satire that is resonant in Canadian and American culture. What is reassuring, however, is that Bob and Doug return from their whirlwind journey through American fame unchanged. Although SCTV's parody of American television represented an ongoing performance and negotiation of cultural difference, these two characters always offered an unrelenting stability in their representation of Canadian identity through both their personality and the recurring two-minute "Great White North" sketch. Representing not only Canada, but an underlying critique of the federal government's intervention in Canadian identity, Bob and Doug are a stable Canadian anchor in SCTV's sea of American culture. Those who worry that the influence of American media will rob Canada of any semblance of national identity should take comfort in the fact that Bob and Doug face the barrage of American media hype and return, thirsty for beer and new topics.

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## Notes

1. In 1981, Canadians celebrated them with conventions, parades and even a Bob and Doug day at a Toronto high school: Leslie Scrivner, "Trend to toques, beer, back bacon is taking off, eh," *The Toronto Star*, November 2, 1981, sec. A, A4.

i2. "BRIEFLY Order of Canada for Bob and Doug?," *The Globe and Mail*, November 3, 1981, 17.

3. Dave Thomas, Robert David. Crane, and Susan. Carney, *SCTV : Behind the Scenes* (Toronto, Ont.: M&S, 1996), 121.

4. In 2007, the pair celebrated their "2-4" (24th) anniversary with a television special and DVD release and on April 19, 2009, Global Television premiered a new animated series based on the characters.

5. "How to Get a Mouse in Your Beer Bottle: And other topics about the Great White North," *Winnipeg Free Press*, March 6, 1982, 12-13.

6. Ibid., 13.

7. This story is told in many articles about the McKenzie brothers' success. For examples, see: Christopher Connelly, Lawrence O'Toole, "A southern triumph for the Great White North," *Maclean's*, August 31, 1981; "SCTV in orbit as takeoffs take off, eh," *The Globe and Mail*, October 24, 1981; Cutler Durkee, "With Beer, Back Bacon and Banter, 'SCTV's Bob and Doug Mine Comedy Gold in the 'Great White North'," *People Weekly*, February 1, 1982; "Two Nerds From Canada," February 4, 1982.

8. quoted in Lynn Van Martre, "G'day you hosers!," *Chicago Tribune*, January 17, 1982.

9. Harry F Waters and Neil Karlen, "TV's Frozen Wasteland," *Newsweek*, July 19, 1982, 65.

10. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: community, culture, difference*, ed. Johnathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 223.

11. Ibid., 225.

12. Ibid., 222; In On Location (2005), Serra Tinic uses Hall's notion of identity in "process" and "production" to describe "the Canadian identity crisis." Serra A Tinic, *On Location: Canada's Television Industry in a Global Market*, Cultural spaces (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 20.

13. Margaret Atwood, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose, 1960-1982* (Toronto: Anansi, 2000), 183.

14. Ted Madger quoted in Tinic, *On Location*, 22.

15. Tony Schwartz, "Whatever Happend To TV's 'Saturday Night Live'?," *New York Times*, January 11, 1981, D1.

16. As Marc Raboy suggests, attempts to reconcile localized identities with a Canadian national identity have most often occurred in the interests of white, English-speaking Canada (8). It is necessary, then, to specify that the Canadian identity with which *SCTV* engages forms part of the dominant discourses of English-speaking Canada and to remember that identity and culture, whether in national or international contexts, is always complex and contested. *Missed Opportunities* (Montreal: McGill & Queens UP, 1990)

17. Hall, "Cultural Identity," 222

18. Initially, Global only aired one episode a month, but eventually, the show became a weekly fixture.

19. Margaret Daly, "Second City's made it!," *The Toronto Star*, October 4, 1978, D1.

20. *Second City Television: A History and Episode Guide* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2008), 103.

21. Howard Rosenberg, "'SCTV': Satire Blooms in TV desert," *Los Angeles Times*, July 13, 1981, G3.

22. Robbins, *Second City Television*, 103.

23. Susan Whitall, "SCTV Takes Off, eh? (Thank You Canada!)," *Creem*, March 1982, 27.

24. In 1982, *SCTV* was nominated for Outstanding Writing in a Variety or Music Program for "Great White North Palace" (April 16, 1982), "Christmas Show (Dec. 18, 1982), "You!" (Oct. 23, 1981), Outstanding Variety, Music or Comedy Program, Andrea Martin was nominated for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy or Variety or Music Series and the show won the Emmy for Writing for "Moral Majority Show" (July 10, 1981). In 1983 *SCTV* was nominated again for writing for "Jane Eyrehead" (Nov. 26, 1982), "Towering Inferno" (Dec 10, 1982), "Midnight Cowboy II" (Mar. 18, 1983), "Christmas" (Dec. 17, 1982), Outstanding Variety Music or Comedy Program. "Sweeps Week" (Feb 25, 1983), was nominated for Outstanding Special Visual Effects, Outstanding Directing in a Variety or Music Program and it won the award for writing.

25. Jim Bawden, "SCTV Network could have the last laugh on NBC yet," *The Toronto Star*, May 4, 1983, sec. B, B1.

26. "SCTV lives, on despite NBC cancellation," *Broadcasting*, May 23, 1983, 60.

27. *Laughter*, trans. Fred Rothwell and Brereton, Cloudesley, 1914, 6.

28. Ibid.

29. "Canadian Humour in the Media: Exporting John Candy and Importing Homer Simpson," in *Seeing ourselves : media power and policy in Canada*, ed. Helen Holmes and David Taras (Toronto; London: Harcourt Brace & Company, Canada, 1996), 85.

30. Ibid., 84; Rasporich argues that Canadians were more "comfortable... satirizing their heroes and heads of state" than Americans. In more recent years, television programming like *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* have embraced political satire and built their massive success upon "mocking and ridiculing" President George W. Bush.

31. Ibid., 85.

32. Ibid., 86.

33. *On Location*, 131.

34. Rasporich identifies the origins of this kind of humor in Thomas Haliburton's *The Clockmaker* (1835), featuring Sam Slick "the archetypal, enterprising, fast-talking American Yankee" "Canadian Humour in the Media," 85. For a more recent example, see Rick Mercer's *Talking to Americans* (2001).

35. Canadian sketch comics Wayne and Shuster appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948-1971) sixty seven times. *SCTV* and Second City performers such as Dan Ackroyd, John Candy, Catherine O'Hara, Martin Short and Rick Moranis went on to produce films in America. More recently, sketch troupe *The Kids in the Hall* (1988-1984) crossed over to American television and Jim Carrey and Mike Myers launched successful careers on television and then in film.

36. By 1981, when *SCTV* moved to NBC, John Candy had already laid the groundwork for his future stardom by appearing in supporting roles in *1941* (with *SCTV*'s Joe Flaherty, 1979), *The Blues Brothers* (1980), and *Stripes* (1981). Dave Thomas and Rick Moranis left *SCTV* to produce *Strange Brew* in 1983 and other cast members including Martin Short, Eugene Levy, and Catherine O'Hara, went on to have relatively successful careers in Hollywood.

37. O'Toole, "A southern triumph for the Great White North," 60.

38. "Canadian Humour in the Media," 88-89.

39. Ibid., 85.

40. *SCTV* grew out of the Toronto franchise of Chicago's Second City and two cast members, Joe Flaherty and Andrea Martin were American.

41. "Identity drive jams in neutral," *The Toronto Star*, March 3, 1978, sec. C, C3.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. quoted in Rick Marin, "The Most Entertaining Americans? Canadians," *The New York Times*, June 27, 1993, sec. 2, 1.

47. "That Second City gang on SCTV is okay, eh?," *The Toronto Star*, November 22, 1981, sec. F, F5.

48. Ibid.

49. Candy quoted in Jim Bawden, "Dan would rather folks like him more," *The Toronto Star*, October 22, 1981, sec. F, F1.

50. Candy quoted in Ibid.

51. Candy quoted in Ibid.

52. Rasporich, "Canadian Humour in the Media," 86.

53. Slinger, "Stars and Stripes true SCTV colors," *The Toronto Star*, November 27, 1981, sec. A, A15.

54. A. J Liebling, *Chicago: The Second City* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1974); Jeffrey Sweet, "Star-Spawning Second City Marks 20th Anniversary," *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 1979, sec. N, N5.

55. Sweet, "Star-Spawning Second City Marks 20th Anniversary," N5.

156. "Stars and Stripes true SCTV colors," A17.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

59. Randal McIlroy, "Television," *Winnipeg Free Press*, March 31, 1979, 32.

60. "Second City comics first rate to NBC," *The Toronto Star*, April 22, 1981, sec. D, D1.

61. Rick Groen, "Desperately waiting at the crossroads," *The Globe and Mail*, January 2, 1982, sec. E, E1.

62. Jim Bawden, "SCTV comedy fans grow week to week," *The Toronto Star*, July 31, 1981, sec. D, D1.

63. Tony Atherton, "A day in the life of a young station," *Ottawa Citizen*, November 27, 2002.

64. Ryan Edwardson, *Canadian Content : Culture and the Quest for Nationhood* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 242.

65. Ibid.

66. Because of the show's intense writing and shooting schedule, *SCTV* frequently beefed up their episodes with older sketches from their syndicated run. This may have been a nod to some of the complaints they received.

67. For examples of "Hinterland Who's Who," see http://www.hww.ca/media.asp?mcid=1 "Hinterland Who's Who - Video and Sound Clips Library," http://www.hww.ca/media.asp?mcid=1

68. Byford, Chris, "Highway 61 revisited," *CineAction* 45 (Annual 1998): 10-17.

69. Ibid.

70. Christopher E. Gittings, *Canadian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002), 158.

71. Byford, Chris, "Highway 61 revisited."

72. Schwartz, "Whatever Happened To TV's 'Saturday Night Live'?," D1.

73. Harry F Waters, "Midnight Laughs in a New Key," *Newsweek*, March 30, 1981, 83.

74. Jay Cocks, "Messages from Melonville," *Time*, November 9, 1981, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,922677,00.html.

75. David Bianculli, "Not-ready-for-prime-time comedy alive and funny," *Chicago Tribune*, October 16, 1981, G20.

76. See for example, Jim Bawden, "SCTV coming home to Toronto," *The Toronto Star*, November 30, 1981; Tom Shales, "NBC's Friday Madness," *The Washington Post*, July 31, 1981.

77. Jeffrey S. Miller, "What Closes on Saturday Night," in *NBC : America's network*, ed. Michele Hilmes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 204.

78. Whitall, "SCTV Takes Off, eh? (Thank You Canada!)," 27.

# It Doesn't Seem 'Canadian'

## 'QUALITY TELEVISION' AND CANADIAN-AMERICAN CO-PRODUCTIONS

ANITA LAM

### Flashpoint: One Moment Changes Everything

*Flashpoint,* the English-Canadian[1] one-hour scripted drama about an elite police tactical unit, can be considered the manifestation of a particular moment in Canadian television history. It is a moment that has profoundly changed the television production landscape in such a way that Canadian television scholars have yet to find a way to fruitfully discuss these changes. *Flashpoint* was born from the dramatic drop-off in American television production during the hundred-day Writers Guild of America strike, which spanned from November 2007 to February 2008, and can be considered the most proximate cause of why *Flashpoint* was picked up by American network CBS for co-production and simulcasting purposes. It could be argued that Canadian television scholars were experiencing their own drop-off in the production of innovative theories and methods for how to address the changes being wrought on the production of English-Canadian television programs. They continue to analyze English-Canadian television through the themes of nation building and citizenship,[2] even though this paradigm of understanding television as a tool for disseminating and affirming Canadian identity has been considered a constraint to new forms of television scholarship.[3] It is particularly a limitation to understanding the production of the new crop of Canadian-American co-productions on private television networks (e.g. CTV and CanWest Global). Analysis of these programs is not furthered by scholarly arguments for public television service, or by determining the ways in which the CBC's mandate to "Canadianize" television has succeeded or not. Such analysis is also disabled by redundant analyses of how aggressive American culture is endangering a traditional Canadian culture,[4] precisely because a successful co-produced program must appeal to both sets of audiences in the context of their respective cultures.[5]

This paper is informed by the particular context of producing this new crop of English-Canadian television programs for a private television network. However, it will not be a macro-analysis of the political economies that have produced such a context, even though such an analysis has long informed the study of English-Canadian television studies.[6] Instead, I will use a microanalysis of the production of a CanWest Global/Showcase pilot, tentatively titled *Lawyers, Guns and Money*[7], to think though the following questions: how do producers negotiate the content of the pilot to appeal to both Canadian network programmers and

*Lawyers, Guns and Money/Cra$h and Burn*
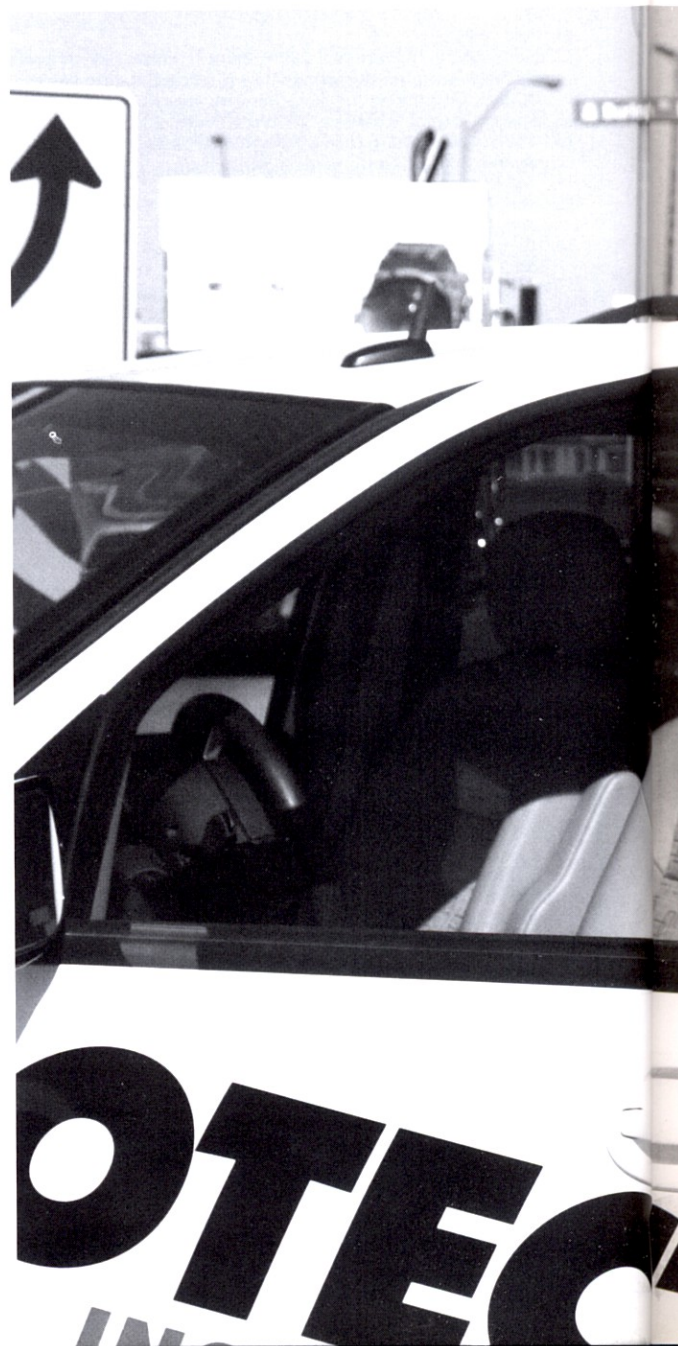
potential American network programmers, so that both sets of programmers would agree that it is "quality" television? Is the standard of "quality" set by American television programs? Is this appeal to "quality" what makes a pilot successful (or rephrased, how do you measure the success of a television pilot)? I have chosen *Lawyers, Guns and Money* as my case study because of my capacity to observe its production as an insider, which allows me to document how the production has shaped itself to be palatable to both the Canadian and (potential) American markets. Drawing from actor-network theory, I argue that this particular Canadian pilot's success is due to its ability to mobilize American-associated markers of "quality" in order to convince network executives that it itself is a "quality" production.

## Economic Flashpoint: Canada Exports "Quality"

While American networks have been making television shows in Canada for years to gain tax benefits, *Flashpoint* became only the second Canadian-American (CTV/CBS) co-production

of a television series, following *Due South* in 1994. Its consistently strong prime-time ratings on both sides of the border have made *Flashpoint* a successful experiment, and a blueprint for a new economic model of television production. Facing a softening advertising market, a fragmented audience, reduced production on the number of television pilots, a general reduction in prime-time programming costs, and the economic downturn,[8] American network executives have become quite open to co-producing television series with Canadian independent production companies. Since *Flashpoint* has come to exemplify the success of Canadian content with an American audience, the following co-productions are being developed and/or shooting currently in Toronto, and will be aired between 2009 and 2010: CTV/CBS' *The Bridge,* CTV/NBC's *The Listener,* and Global/ABC's *Copper.* While one can emphasize the economic advantages of co-productions, Peter Sussman, former chief executive officer of Alliance Atlantis Communications Inc.'s entertainment division, suggests a different emphasis: "These shows didn't get on the air because of

the business deal. They made it onto the air because they are *quality* productions".[9]

Here I want to investigate what might be meant by the term "quality." Although Canada is the second, only to the U.S., largest exporter of television programming worldwide,[10] Canadians themselves have long held the view that their television is not "quality" television—namely, that it is not very good because it is awkward, slow, and earnest.[11] Reiterating this sentiment, Enrico Colantoni, principal actor on *Flashpoint*, "wants people to know that [*Flashpoint* is] a Canadian show and be fooled by that…[and] wants them to know that Canada produces *quality* shows and we can compete with the best of the American product".[12] Again, the term "quality" surfaces, but this time to suggest that "quality" is defined by being as good as the best American television programs. This in turn implies that the standard of "quality" is set by American television productions and any Canadian program aspiring to be "quality" must be made equivalent to this standard. The question then becomes, assuming that "quality" is not an ahistorical designation, why is "quality" programming associated with American programming?

As screenwriter and producer of *Flashpoint* and *Copper*, Tassie Cameron offers the following: "*Flashpoint's* success is due both to its storylines as well as the decision to invest in the show's look and feel, so it doesn't seem 'Canadian'…This doesn't feel low-budget".[13] First, she suggests that production value has become attached to designations of "quality" programs. Specifically, programs that have a low-budget look and feel are somehow distinctly "Canadian," precisely because of their apparent low production value. In contrast, high production values mark a program as "quality" and perhaps not conventionally "Canadian." For Canadian independent producers, the addition of an American co-production company is what allows them the ability to provide these high production values on a one-hour dramatic television series. The customary adage is that the Americans bring the money, and the Canadians show them how to use it. This has traditionally been the case because Canadian production crews have had to produce their television programs with much lower budgets than their American counterparts. In the process, Canadian crews have learned shortcuts for mimicking better production value on a shoestring.

In addition to visual "quality," Tassie Cameron also suggests that narrative "quality" is integral to creating "quality" programming. Because her work has been on producing police procedurals,[14] it is worth noting that their narratives are "very, very plot driven. It's perfect television. It fits well into an hour. There's a mystery: there's a whodunit or a why-done-it. There's something to solve. There's a good guy; a bad guy. It's all the kind of primal stuff that television viewers like".[15] Moreover, the narrative of the workplace procedural is precisely the "quality" programming that American networks are currently interested in putting on their programming schedules. As such, they fit within the dominant genre trend set by the menu of American television programming for 2009-2010. As *Variety* explains it, "meat and potatoes dominate the [programming] menu," wherein fanciful concepts are replaced by more traditional cop, medical and lawyer franchises.[16]

Lastly, the designation of "quality" television programs has been linked to programs provided by premium American cable networks, such as HBO. I discuss this last association in order to set up my examination of the pilot *Lawyers, Guns and Money* because of the project's associations with a Canadian cable channel (CanWest Global/Showcase) and with HBO itself. American cable television has elevated television's status from low culture into the vaulted sphere of distinction,[17] producing "quality" itself if not necessarily television. Consider HBO's tagline: "It's not television. It's HBO." As a branding strategy for a subscription network, HBO requires differentiation from advertiser-supported networks, by providing "quality" content not available to those networks.[18] By providing these programs, HBO was able to pioneer particular narrative forms that involved character-driven, serial stories that did not shy away from moral ambiguity or character complexity. Interestingly enough, these appear to be the same qualities that Mary Jane Miller attributes to Canadian television shows. In her seminal essay "Inflecting the formula," Miller argues that while Canadian television uses the same formats as their American counterparts, Canadian shows are less reliant on stereotypes and formulas. As a result, they demand more thoughtful engagement with their audiences, particularly due to the more ambiguous and open-ended narratives.[19] Here, the categorization of television shows as Canadian or American/cable becomes muddled due to the similarity of their defining storytelling features. While I am not currently offering an alternative definition, it is worth highlighting that these definitions speak to different analytic contexts: HBO's production (and marketing) context versus the reception context in which Miller makes her argument. Because it is important to distinguish these contexts, the rest of this paper will be concerned with the production context of a Canadian cable pilot.[20] While the producers of the pilot implicitly appeal to the notion of "quality" in all its multifaceted (and mostly American) associations, I want to discuss the production of this pilot by taking theoretical and methodological cues from actor-network theory, which will allow me to avoid making binary distinctions between Canadian and American television productions. Instead, it will allow me to chart the dynamic circulation of ideas and talent between the two countries.

**Actor-Network Theory: "Quality" and Pilot Success**
The analytic foundation for this paper—actor-network theory—comes from science and technology studies research. As such, this paper takes cues from actor-network theory, but does not follow it with blind obedience. Essentially, actor-network theory begins with the metaphoric premise of associations, and is a method to describe the deployment of those associations (or connections).[21] Expanding the humanistic focus that characterizes auteur theory, the actors that form these associations include not only people, but texts, objects and technologies. Using the premises of actor-network theory, I want to demonstrate that particular associations are deployed in order to make a "quality" pilot, which is necessary in order to make a "successful" pilot. However, I would first like to attempt to work through how to define a pilot's "success" before the fact of established success.

Since the pilot can be considered an experimental attempt at conceptualizing and concretizing ideas for a successful television series, it is hard to define "success" from the context of audience reception in such cases. While the success of television programs can be measured quantitatively (through ratings) or qualitatively (through fan attachment or television

reviews), the pilot's "success" cannot be defined by these measures. While American pilots are pre-tested on a sample of viewers, substituting for the larger audience,[22] the fate of Canadian pilots rests solely in the decisions of network executives without reference to any actual audience response. In short, the "success" of a Canadian pilot can be defined by the extent to which it convinces network executives that it will succeed in the aforementioned ways. From an actor-network approach, "success" is then a measure of being able to generate, mobilize and maintain interest in the project, where this interest is then translated into economic benefits (e.g. funding).[23] In this case, "success" is the ability of an independent production company to generate and maintain the interest of network executives, by translating the multifaceted notion of "quality" into a manifest product. In order to mobilize network interest, the producers must recruit allies[24] in their campaign to produce a successful pilot. These allies confer the distinction of "quality" to the project, and range from texts to people. By this definition, *Lawyers, Guns and Money* is a successful pilot because it persuaded Showcase to greenlight it as a series, which will begin airing in 2010.

### The Case Study: *Lawyers, Guns and Money*

> *Lawyers, Guns and Money* is the story of Jimmy Burns, a young [insurance] claims adjuster for a cut-throat corporation. Jimmy maneuvers his way around insurance scams and the criminal underworld all while trying to escape his past and make a better life for himself on the gritty streets of Hamilton.[25]

Before I examine the circulation of American and Canadian allies in the production of a "quality" pilot, I want to explain my association to *Lawyers, Guns and Money (LGM)*. I was hired by Whizbang Films, a Toronto-based independent production company headed by actor/writer/director Paul Gross and Frank Siracusa,[26] in June 2008 to research the Canadian insurance industry because the producers were interested in translating a script originally set in New York to a Canadian context for CanWest Global/Showcase. Because I was interested in researching the production process of crime-related television programs for my dissertation research, I had been given permission to see the process through to the end of shooting. As such, I was aware that pre-production decisions were influenced by the producers' attempt to appeal to an American cable network as a possible co-producer or distributor for the show. These decisions were balanced with the need to provide sufficient "Canadian content" in order to be eligible for funding from the Canadian Television Fund and from tax credits. Nevertheless, if "quality" depends on the deployment of associations, then all associations seem to lead back to the ostensible provider of "quality" itself: HBO. The spectre of HBO hovers in the background of the pilot's script and the production's recruitment of talent, implying that this American ally was valuable in the creation of a Canadian drama.

### The Script
Having previously written episodes of the first season of the HBO drama *Deadwood* (2004), showrunner and scriptwriter Malcolm MacRury had originally written the pilot for *LGM* with HBO in mind. As such, the script contains all the types of scenes that one would expect on an American cable drama, in other words ones that would not be censored for their depictions of graphic sexuality, coarse language or violence. For example, the "obligatory HBO titty bar shot"[27] is fulfilled by the pilot episode's final party scene, which is replete with scantily-clad females and strippers. Though HBO passed on the script, the series was latrer sold to Showcase as "*The Sopranos* meets *The Office*." Although this is also illustrative of what Todd Gitlin calls the recombinant form,[28] a Hollywood hybrid that assumes that selected features from recent hits can be spliced together to make a eugenic success,[29] it is noteworthy that HBO's *The Sopranos* is invoked as the particular hit television show to be modified. In fact, *The Sopranos* is often situated in both its marketing campaign and subsequent television criticism as an exemplar of "quality" television. This "quality" can be thought to stem from the "indigenously American Quality that focused on a supposed Everyman as he confronted life's [moral] quandaries"[30] and either grows from the encounter, or enables spectators to feel that they have grown. Similarly, Jimmy Burns, the protagonist in *LGM*, is written in this tradition of indigenous American Quality. Having grown up on the wrong side of the tracks, Jimmy is the Everyman trying to make it in a ruthless, corporate world, facing the moral dilemmas that come with corporate success. In short,

> He's like Raymond Chandler's hero, Philip Marlow: "Down these dirty streets walks a man who is not yet dirty."…Think of him as an everyman [sic]. A stand-in for the embattled middle class. Struggling to hold onto a piece of the Canadian Dream while corporate organizations and organizations of criminals devour the rest.[31]

Besides the fact that the representation of the Canadian Dream is suspiciously similar, if not identical, to the American Dream of "making it," *LGM* uses American texts—in particular, *The Sopranos* and a misquoted version of Raymond Chandler's celebrated passage from his essay on *The Simple Art of Murder* (1944)– as allies to generate interest in Showcase network executives for its potential as a "quality" series. All of these intertextual references suggest that *LGM* is born from a tradition of "quality," and consequently is itself a "quality" production.

### The Circulation of Talent
As part of selling the characters by providing an immediate visual of the character's "look" and appeal, casting ideas had been bandied about between Whizbang Films and network executives early in the process of script revisions. CanWest Global/Showcase loved the ideas of casting Luke Kirby as Jimmy Burns, and Clark Johnson as Walker Hearn (a retired cop who now heads the Special Investigative Unit at the insurance company).The network was "already crossing fingers and toes [for this casting]".[32] Both of these pieces of casting satisfy the "marquee casting" criterion associated with the casting of television pilots, in which the cultural capital embodied by the actor is absorbed and used to sell the production. Clark Johnson and Luke Kirby are well-known Canadian actors who have had American success, particularly in critically well-received HBO shows. As the Canadian Press release notes, "the Toronto-raised Johnson was a regular on the U.S. series, *The*

*Wire*, while Hamilton's Kirby appeared on *Tell Me You Love Me*.[33] Their American success raises the profile of this Canadian indigenous production because of the premium placed on the value of *American* success, which in turn makes the pilot more appealing to both Canadian and potential American networks. Moreover, Kirby and Johnson's dual citizenship allows Whizbang Films to satisfy CAVCO (Canadian Film or Video Production Tax Credits) requirements, allowing the production to apply for legislated Canadian tax credits. For CAVCO purposes, "Canadian" is defined as a Canadian citizen per the *Citizenship Act*.[34] Thus, the hybrid nature of these actors' citizenship—that is, they are simultaneously Canadian and American—allows them to circulate between the two countries for employment, and will ultimately echo the circulation of the show itself in both Canadian and American broadcasting contexts.

## The Mean Streets are Dirty: Relocating to Hamilton, Ontario

As previously mentioned, *LGM* was originally set in New York City, which the original script had stressed through shots of Coney Island, Harlem and the Statue of Liberty. As a condition for development by CanWest Global/Showcase, the original script needed to be revised and translated into a Canadian context in order to satisfy the network's mandate of delivering Canadian content programming. It was Whizbang Films' idea to relocate the story to Hamilton, Ontario. In contrast to the usual representation of a Canadian setting as "Somewhere U.S.A." or "Nowhere Land" for American film and television productions,[35] Malcolm MacRury and Ken Girotti, writer-producer and director of the *LGM* pilot, respectively, were determined to represent Hamilton *as* Hamilton. While this might be related to the larger trend of creating Canadian-American co-productions, in which "[Canadian] locations travel very well now",[36] this is a very recent move in producing "quality" television in Canada. For example, prior to *Flashpoint's* established success on both sides of the border, its Toronto setting was initially downplayed by executive producer Bill Mustos. He warns viewers that they are "not going to see a show that is screaming 'Canada.' It's a show in a big sophisticated city where crises take place. The stories we're trying to tell are universal stories".[37] Similarly, in an early interview, *Flashpoint* actor Enrico Colantoni had emphasized that Toronto is never identified as the city in which the series is set.[38] In short, Toronto is not represented *as* Toronto, but as a metonymy for the Big, Metropolitan City in which universal stories take place. It becomes an archetypal place of Mean Streets down which every police officer must walk. Once *Flashpoint* was able to dominate ratings in its programming timeslot, shots of Toronto's distinctive landmarks began to appear, including the CN Tower, TTC transit stations, Yonge Street, and various Greater Toronto Area communities. The on-screen acknowledgement of a Canadian setting seems to be acceptable only once the television program establishes success. Since American audiences have continued to watch *Flashpoint* even with the addition of these markers of its Canadian setting, it suggests that the show's setting might be irrelevant to subsequent determinations of its "quality" status.

What is remarkable about *LGM* is that it immediately acknowledges and celebrates its Hamilton setting. Perhaps it is able to do so because the other markers of "quality" have already been deployed to colour it with distinction. If *LGM* takes its cue from the "quality" television associated with HBO, then it follows in the footsteps of the series *The Wire*, for which Clark Johnson directed much of the first season. Because *The Wire* grounded its storylines in the gritty city of Baltimore,[39] the particular sociocultural reality of Baltimore could be dramatized. In a similar vein, the particularities of Hamilton are dramatized since the city itself becomes an important character in the series.[40] In the pilot, Hamilton (nicknamed The Hammer with all of its connotations to male toughness) appears like a run-down, gritty character that has seen better times, but is tied to its blue-collar roots. As such, Hamilton is not just another metonymy for the Mean Streets; instead, it "dirties" those mean streets, both literally and metaphorically. Recall the series' synopsis where Raymond Chandler is misquoted due to the substitution of "dirty" for "mean": "Down these dirty streets walks a man who is not yet dirty." Perhaps in misquoting, *LGM* is also distancing itself from its own original setting, disassociating from the New York of Martin Scorsese's film *Mean Streets* (1973). In doing so, the *LGM* producers have "dirtied" up the order of showcasing "Canadian culture" as per the Ministry of Cultural Heritage's imperative for Canadian film and television productions. While the producers could have chosen Hamilton to metonymically represent a Post-Industrial Playground, they have gone beyond mechanically fulfilling the Ministry of Cultural Heritage's mandate. That is, the producers represent Canadian culture in a way that has rarely been seen.

If Canadian culture is defined by the national ideology of multiculturalism, then it is worth examining how *LGM* represents multiculturalism. Aside from the depictions of Hamilton as ethnically diverse and multicultural, in contrast to depictions of Hamilton as "Somewhere U.S.A.",[41] the revised *LGM* script includes a comment on the cooperative nature of multiculturalism. The pilot's insurance scam is no longer attributed to the Russian mob alone as it was in the original HBO script. Instead, it is attributed to "close cooperation between the Slavic gangs and other ethnic groups—East Indian, Asian, what have you. Unheard of in New York but the new deal here. Some kind of Multiculturalism I guess".[42] In addition to being borne out from the research done to anchor the pilot in the reality of Ontario insurance scams, such a representation of multiculturalism gestures at the complexity of representation, which characterizes "quality" narratives. Rather than represent multiculturalism conventionally as the "mosaic" that ties together law-abiding society, the *LGM* script also depicts it as the "new deal" that enables cooperation between ethnic groups for criminal purposes. This also differs from the more conventional film and television depictions of the segregation and specialization of criminal activities by various ethnic groups. By showing the "unintended side effect of multiculturalism—ethnic gang cooperation",[43] the "quality" of the revised script impressed network executives.

## Made in Canada: Last Notes on Producing "Quality"

The success of *Lawyers, Guns and Money* can be attributed to its ability to mobilize American-associated markers of "quality," particularly its associations to HBO, to convince Canadian cable network executives that it is itself a "quality" production. Although the standard of "quality" appears to be set by American television programs, the production of *LGM* suggests that designations of "quality" are not precluded by stories set

in distinctly Canadian settings. Instead, the Canadian setting might inject new life into conventional formulas set by both American and Canadian film and television. Innovation is required when producing television programs for a dual audience, and this innovation may be the ultimate criterion for producing "quality" programming. I offer these notes in order to suggest a new and much-needed path for Canadian television studies, given the increasing irrelevance of Canadian national identity to these narratives. In an age in which Canadian-American co-productions are fast becoming the rule rather than the exception, new theories and methodologies are required to understand the circulation of talent, ideas and texts that characterize the hybridity of such productions.

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## Notes

1   I will be using the term "English-Canadian" to refer to Canadian television programs that are produced in the English language. In English Canada, these programs compete on a weekly basis against American-produced television shows to garner ratings. In contrast, the top rated programs in Quebec are French-language Canadian productions. This speaks to the different production imperatives that inform the making of English-Canadian television programs.

2   E.g. Eds. Druick, Zoe and Aspa Kotsopoulos. *Programming Reality: Perspectives on English-Canadian Television.* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2008).

3   Please see Pike, R. M. "Trying to Stay Canadian-maybe: Uncertainties and Paradoxes in Public Policies for Canadian Television Broadcasting." *International Journal of Social Economics, Volume 25* (1998): 5-7. Or Demers, Francois. "Canadian Television: The Exhaustion of a National Paradigm?" *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, Volume 47(4),* 656-61.

4   As a response to such arguments and an examination of how Canadians have resisted the encroachment of American popular culture, please see Eds. Flaherty, David H., and Frank E. Manning. *The Beaver Bites Back? American Popular Culture in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).

5   It would be interesting to see how Canadian programs are affecting American audiences. This research question might be a more valuable avenue into illuminating the notion of what constitutes Canadian culture and how different it is from American popular culture. For example, how are American audiences qualitatively reacting to *Flashpoint*? More importantly, because academic analyses have tended to frame the debate in either/or terms (e.g. a television program is either American or Canadian, and it is influencing a Canadian audience in a particular way), these terms are not useful for describing programs that are produced by *both* Canadians and Americans, and are intended to influence *both* audiences.

6   Druick and Kotsopoulos 2008: 1

7   Since the writing of this article, the show has been re-titled *Cra$h and Burn*. Because the primary documents used in this article refer to the show as *Lawyers, Guns and Money*, I have continued to refer to the show as such throughout the rest of the article.

8   Fixmer, Andy. "CBS, NBC buy Canadian TV programs to save on costs (Update 2)." *Bloomberg,* March 9, 2009. Last retrieved on April 28, 2009 from http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601103&sid=afYDvToAWJks&refer=us.

9   Quoted in Fixmer, March 9, 2009. My emphasis.

10  Tinnic, Serra. *On Location: Canada's Television Industry in a Global Market* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005): viii.

11  Attalah, Paul. "Canadian television exports: Into the mainstream." *New Patterns in Global Television: Peripheral Vision.* Eds. John Sinclair, Elizabeth Jacka, and Stuart Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 161-191.

12  Quoted in Taylor, Kate. "Co-productions made a comeback." *Globe and Mail,* December 5, 2008. My emphasis.

13  Quoted in "U.S. eager to team up on Canadian shows, says TV screenwriter." *CBC News,* April 29, 2009. Last retrieved on May 1, 2009 from http://www.cbc.ca/arts/tv/story/2009/04/29/cameron-tv-police-shows.html?ref=rss.

14  In the history of Canadian-American serial television co-productions, it is interesting that these have always been workplace procedurals, particularly police procedurals (e.g. *Due South, Flashpoint, Copper,* and *The Bridge*). It is not clear why these narratives have been particularly successful, although it might be easier to export "the job" (i.e. the professional crime-fighter) because it does not necessarily contain any specific sociocultural particularities, with the exception of the depiction of "the Mountie" in *Due South*.

15  Quoted in *CBC News,* April 29 2009.

16  Schneider, Michael. "In tough times, pilots go broad: New shows follow familiar trends." *Variety.* February 20, 2009.

17  Banet-Weiser, Sarah, Cynthia Chris, and Anthony Freitas. *Cable visions: Television beyond broadcasting* (New York: New York University Press, 2007): Introduction.

18  Lotz, Amanda D. "The HBO Mandate: Innovation." *Flow Conference Roundtable: HBO's Legacy and Future* (2006). Last retrieved on May 8, 2009 from http://www.flowconference.org/rt19lotz.doc.

19  Miller, Mary Jane. "Inflecting the formula: The First Seasons of *Street Legal* and *L.A. Law*." *The Beaver Bites Back? American Popular Culture in Canada.* Eds. David H. Flaherty and Frank E. Manning (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993): 104-122.

20  This becomes important because it is the context likely to be obscured in academic critical analyses of the content found in television shows, which is itself a particular kind of reception context. That is, if *Lawyers, Guns and Money* were to become a well-received show, it is likely that it would be attributed as a successful Canadian drama even though its success depends on the circulation of Canadian and American ideas and talent.

21  Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

22  Gitlin, Todd. *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

23  Latour 2005.

24  Latourian actor-network theory uses the metaphor of war to describe "science in action," which is then understood as the process by which scientists father "allies" for their framing of natural phenomena. These allies include texts (e.g. a scientific article's citations to other works), choice of visual inscription (e.g. the scientist's choice of visually representing his/her findings), scientific instruments and mouthpieces (e.g. politicians).

25  Quoted from "CanWest Orders Two More New Canadian Original Series: A-List Canadian talent sign on for Lawyers, Guns and Money and Shattered." *CanWest Media Press Release,* April 27, 2009. Last retrieved on May 2, 2009 from http://www.canwesttvmedia.com/press/read/49.

26  Gross and Siracusa had worked together on *Due South,* and as such understand the ways in which Canadian-American co-productions operate. Whizbang Films is also heavily involved in service productions, such as the production of American pilots.

27  Lippman, Laura. "The Women of *The Wire* (No, seriously)." *The Wire: Truth be told.* Ed. Rafael Alvarez (New York: Pocket Books 2004): 56.

28  The crop of successful Canadian pilots tend to use successful American shows as the templates for their recombinant tag-line. For example, *Copper* has been described as *Grey's Anatomy* in the world of rookie cops; *Shattered,* the story of an emotionally devastated super-cop, is described as *CSI* meets *A Beautiful Mind*. This might be explained by the Canadian production company's intent to find an American network for distribution and/or co-production, in which case these shows are an easily recognizable reference points for American network executives in contrast to the use of Canadian programs.

29  Gitlin, Todd. *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983): 64, 75.

30  Polan, Dana. "Cable watching: HBO, *The Sopranos,* and Discourses of Distinction." *Cable visions: Television beyond broadcasting.* Eds. Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Chris, and Anthony Freitas (New York: New York University Press, 2007): 264.

31  Quoted from the (Production) Synopsis of *Lawyers, Guns and Money.*

32  Quoted from CanWest/Global's Network Notes, July 22 2008.

33  "New Crime Dramas Coming to Showcase." *The Canadian Press,* April 27, 2009.

34  *Canadian Film or Video Production Tax Credit (CPTC) Guidelines.* Last retrieved on May 2, 2009 from http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/bcpac-cavco/pgm/cipc-cptc/pubs/103-eng.cfm.

35  Tinnic 2005: 113.

36  CTV creative honcho, Susan Boyle, quoted in Szlarski, Cassandra. "Borders came down for Canadian TV." *The Canadian Press,* December 10, 2008.

37  Quoted in Stelter, Brian. "Canadians Sneak Across the Border, Hide on CBS." *New York Times: TV Decoder Blog,* July 11, 2008. Last retrieved on May 2, 2009 from http://tvdecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/07/11/canadians-sneak-across-border-hide-on-cbs/.

38  Enrico Colantoni's CTV *Flashpoint* interview. Last retrieved on May 2, 2009 from http://watch.ctv.ca/etalk/tv/extended—-flashpoint/#clip61512.

39  Ed. Alvarez 2005.

40  Girotti, Ken. Extras casting meeting, October 15, 2008.

41  Ibid.

42  MacRury, Malcolm, Revised *Lawyers, Guns and Money*

43  Quoted from CanWest/Global's Network Notes, July 22 2008.

# Still Mining His Winnipeg

## AN INTERVIEW WITH
## GUY MADDIN

BY JOHN SEMLEY

Part expressionistic city symphony film, part mischievous autobiographical reminisce, Guy Maddin's *My Winnipeg* (2007) served as something of a culmination of much of his work this decade. Like the mock memoir *Cowards Bend the Knee* (2003) and the teen detective Guignol sex-romp *Brand Upon the Brain!* (2006), *My Winnipeg* continued Maddin's turn inside, towards a pointed mythologizing of the self. Maddin's portrait of his heavily psychologised relationship to his Manitoba hometown brought him a torrent of critical acclaim—awards at the TIFF appearances on year-end best of lists, etc.—making it his most commercially viable film since 2003's *The Saddest Music in the World*.

Further expanding the *My Winnipeg* brand is a recent companion book released this May by Coach House Books. Including essays by those involved with the film, an annotated screenplay, slews of stills, collages and others images culled by Maddin and, standing as its centrepiece, a lengthy conversation between Maddin and CanLit juggernaut Michael Ondaatje, the *My Winnipeg* book further expands (and exhausts) the relationship between Maddin and Winnipeg.

I sat down with Guy recently to chat about the book, the enduring popularity of his films, and what's left now for him now that his own nostalgic impulses have reached the point of fatigue.
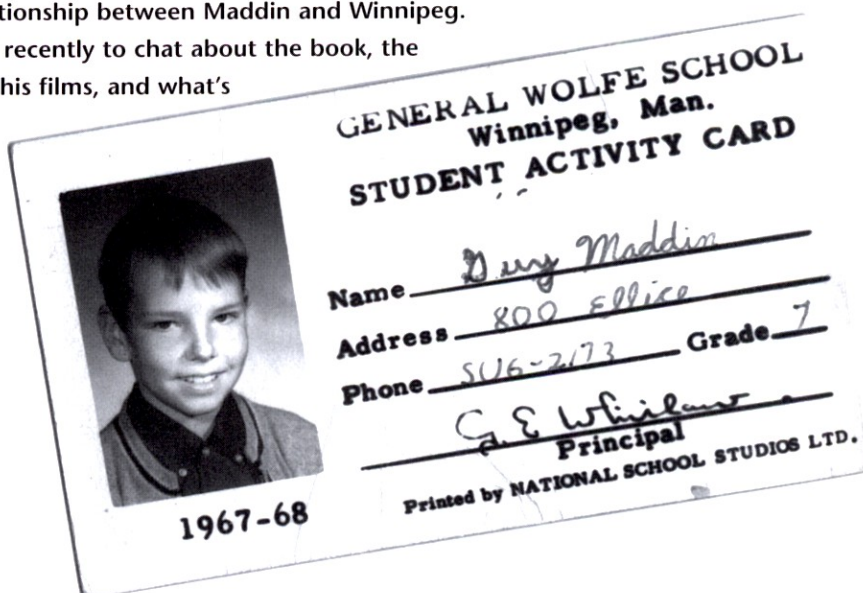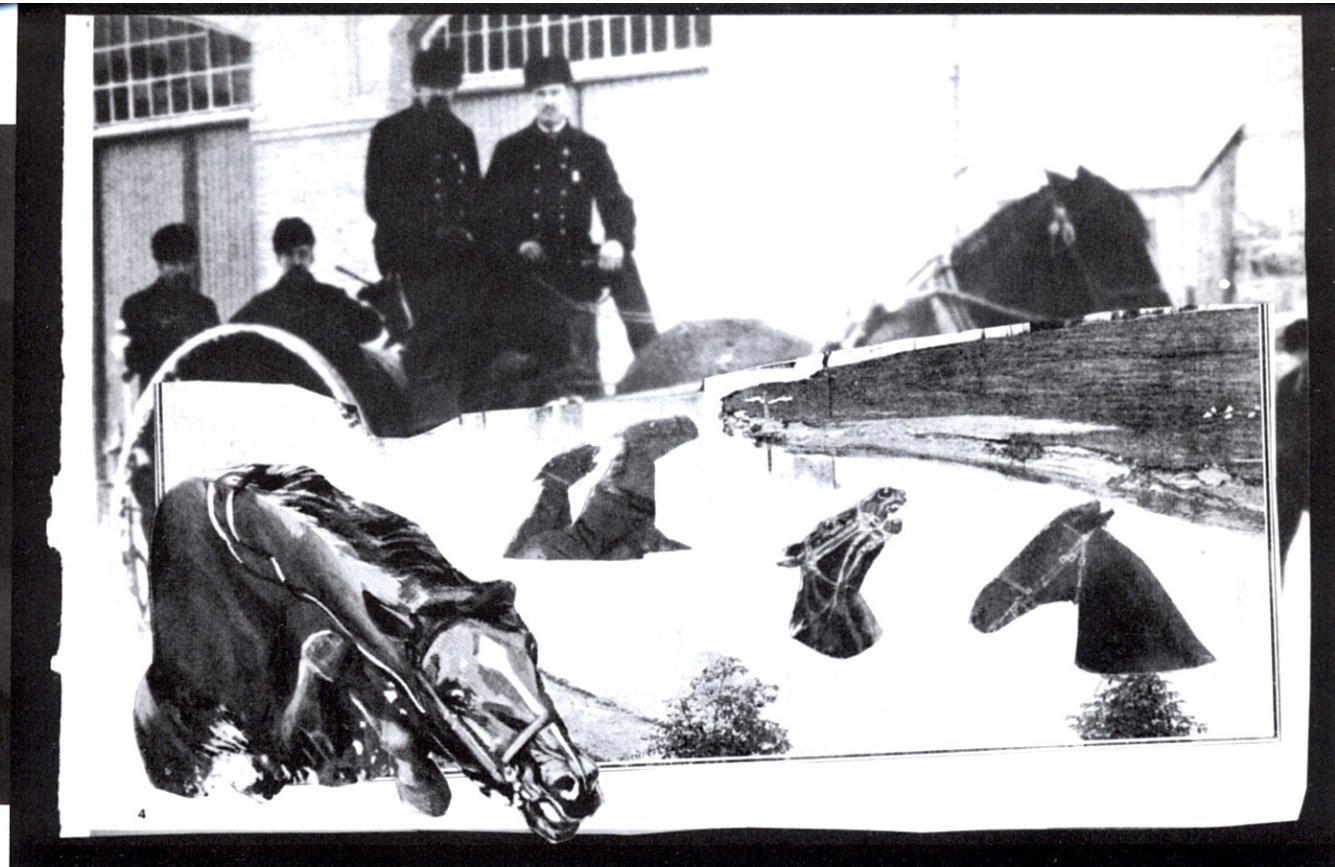
**JS:** How did the *My Winnipeg* book come about? I know you have a previous relationship with Coach House Books. Did they approach you about it?

**GM:** It came about in a weird way. When the movie was being released a year ago, one of the promotion ideas—see Canadians have no idea how to sell their films and there's no way Canadians will watch them anyways—but there was talk of making a little limited edition scrapbook of Winnipeg. It was going to be out together by Andy Smetanka who did the titles and all the animation. The distributor was going to pay him $500, some really puny fee to put together basically a hand-made work of art. And then they never paid him money and he started, but they never followed up on it. And everybody who was involved with the idea moved onto other companies. It's so typical of film industry crap. It was Andy himself who approached Coach House Books with the idea. He's so keen all the time.

**JS:** Well there's his piece in the book where he talks about essentially tracking you down and winding up working with you.

**GM:** He's a keen one. And I love his enthusiasm. I love surrounding myself with enthusiastic people because my own enthusiasm is so fragile and I'm always on the verge of going back to bed. So Andy arranged in absentia a meeting among Alana Wilcox at Coach House who ended up editing and designing the book, Jody Shapiro, my producer, and me. My experience with the first book Coach House put out [*From the Atelier Tovar: Selected Writings of Guy Maddin*] was so easy. I basically handed them my diaries and someone edited them. I could have been dead and it wouldn't have been any more difficult. So I blithely agreed, forgetting that unlike my diaries, nothing had been written yet.

**JS:** So you just had to amend the annotations to the script?

**GM:** I had to come up with those, yeah. But it was just a matter until three months had passed after the deadline and have my editor lose my temper with me. I remember I was in Rotterdam. Luckily I was in Europe because whenever I fly there, I can't sleep. I get jetlagged. And Alana demanded to see some of the annotations that I claimed to have been writing for many months. So I just started writing some and sending her a few at a time, but then I became so wide awake that I just kept writing and writing and writing.

**JS:** And from that point, how long did it take to complete?

**GM:** Three days. [laughs] Three days of really bad prose. Then it was a matter of submitting these very delirious annotations. I was hoping Alana give it a pretty major style edit. I mean I was letting her basically rewrite it.

**JS:** And was that the case?

**GM:** [Laughs] No. I mean she corrected the punctuation and cut out some redundant words and some effete words like "actually," and switching "which" with "that" and things like that.

**JS:** Such is the job.

**GM:** Yeah, but it was a pretty light edit. So I was terrified. But the book has got lots of great pictures in it, and collages and notes about the making of the film. It's a nice companion piece. I don't know how anyone not having seen the movie could react to it. It might be a bit of a curiosity, for sure.

**JS:** As far as these annotations, I get the sense that you're trying to be as mischievous as you were with the screenplay itself. Was this the case?

**GM:** There's so much that I chose to include in the movie that seemed highly implausible-seeming things that were completely true...

**JS:** Well "If Day" is the great one that I actually bothered checking and it turned out to be true.

**GM:** Yeah, it was wonderful. And there was also a lot of wish-fulfilment stuff, rants, stories about Winnipeg that really, because of our inability to essentially tell a story properly—namely, to distil its essence and then repeat it differently...Canadians are so literal-minded when they tell stories, no wonder they die on the vine—I would have loved to include in the movie. But it ended up on the page. A lot of these things just came from my notebook. When I was transcribing the annotations I included these ideas, these long-forgotten bits of narrative. The main thing I was glad to get in was the story of my father's eye loss because, I don't know, in my early twenties I always liked George Bataille story "The Eye," and I was amazed how little overlap there was between Bataille always shoving his eyes up vaginas and what happened to my father. But when you're a filmmaker, or a reader, the eye is very important, so it was kind of fun to fit that narrative in there. I tried to figure out a way to fit it in the movie but ultimately it didn't have enough to do with the film and we had enough re-enactments in the movie.

**JS:** You mention Bataille, and in the interview in the *My Winnipeg* book with Michael Ondaatje, you talk a bit about Sebald. I know you have a bit of a passion for European literature—if "passion" isn't too trite a word...

**GM:** I like it, yeah.

**JS:** But as far as literary influences, Sebald seems to make sense with a film like *My Winnipeg*, or even the book. I mean in a book like *The Emigrants*, he's using photographs to sort-of colour the fiction and vice-versa. But is there any other literary stuff you were explicitly drawing from in assembling the book?

**GM:** I kind of liked Wayne Koestenbaum's *Hotel Theory*, which is a big essay on the philosophy of hotels running in one column and in the column next to it is a pulp novel about Lana Turner and Liberace. I like the idea of these parallel texts. Or piecing together very small, readable, bit-sized texts. Or not piece them together, and read them in any order you want.

**JS:** You can indulge the whole McLuhanist literary man wandering eye thing.

**GM:** Yeah, exactly. Something emerges. And the more you read the more it might emerge.

**JS:** I know you like to say that your films are 97% true, and with something like *Brand Upon the Brain!*, it may be a bit easier to get away with that. But with *My Winnipeg* being bankrolled by The Documentary Channel, how does this problematize these sorts of claims?

**GM:** Well now I've proved it. I've proved that they're 100% true! [Laughs]

**JS:** Well then where do you see the difference between truth as being a matter of historical or civic or personal record, or I guess more generally, a claim that has some bearing on reality and the italicized truth, the truth in quotation marks?

**GM:** I guess what I tell my conscience when I'm kneeling down for my night prayers is that as a documentary of me, it is 100% true.

**JS:** Well it's your Winnipeg.

**GM:** It's my Winnipeg, it's my desires, my wishes, my little boners. And I think anyone reading the book or watching the movie can figure that out pretty quickly. So I'm not too worried about having lied or anything. Even my family, who adamantly insist that none of the stuff I put in there about them is true—and they're lying—they aren't as mad at me as they could be. They know that the content of these stories is so wild. But if you want to get literal for a while, there's a lot more that's literally true in the movie or the book than anyone really suspects. I would say it is about 97% true, and the annotations are almost 100% literally true, in addition to being 100% poetically true.

**JS:** Again, when you look at something like the "If Day" sequence in the film, where Winnipeg staged this fake, *War of the Worlds*-style Nazi invasion to help sell war bonds, and it seems again to just be blurring this line between fact and heavily psychologised fact. And for me at least, to go back and find out that that was something that actually happened, well it's more bizarre than nearly anything you could cook up.

**GM:** And it says something really interesting about us too, because it happened and no one remembered. It says a lot about us Canadians and our failure to self-mythologize. I mean, when I talk about mythologizing, I'm not talking about making things up, I'm talking about repeating things even. I grew up in Winnipeg and had never heard about If Day, and it went on during my parents' lifetime. And you think they'd talk about it. My dad was a great raconteur, but it never occurred to him to mention If Day. But what makes If Day interesting for me isn't just that it happened, but that it happened and we'd forgotten it.

**JS:** Well it was Andy Smetanka who brought it to your attention, right?

**GM:** Yeah, he was the only one that knew about it.

**JS:** This idea of mythologizing has obviously been part of your M.O. for some time now. But it seems to me that with *Cowards Bend the Knee*, and *Brand Upon the Brain!*, and now with *My Winnipeg*, there seems to be a more pointed turn inside.

**GM:** I'm hauling stuff directly out of my past without changing it much. I mean I change the settings, in some cases to a rink or a beauty salon or a lighthouse, but other than that, these are real episodes. I found it very liberating to take things directly from my childhood. They came far more detailed than I as a fiction writer could ever cook up. I like the sometimes-implausible and surprising detail that happens only in real life that you could never dream up in fiction.

**JS:** When I last spoke to you about *Brand Upon the Brain!* you told me that you were only given *x* number of days to write the screenplay...

**GM:** Yes, it was very few. I can't remember exactly how few.

**JS:** Well you told me that the only way you could deal with this was to take these leftover scraps of ideas you had lying around and have them gravitate around these personal episodes. And

*My Winnipeg*

moving on to a project like *My Winnipeg* after that, was this process you went through with *Brand* a sort of purge where you knew you could move on from mythologizing Gimli or mythologizing Winnipeg or mythologizing Garbage Hill?

**GM:** Every time I film something, it ends up of units of the physical movie that need to be worked and reworked—massaged into place, given sound effects, cut, mixed, colour-timed, premiered, talked about—until from aversion therapy you just end up so tired of it. I really thought that by making *My Winnipeg*, I would cure myself on Winnipeg and be free to leave. But through this aversion therapy, what you find out is what the subject of your obsession really is. And for me it wasn't Winnipeg, it was whether I should stay or go. And that's what I've cured myself of. I don't care if I stay or go. I realize I'm lucky to live there among the friends and muses I have, but I'm also free to travel as much as I want and go other places. And I can do both, or neither.

**JS:** You can take the boy out of Winnipeg, but you can't take the Winnipeg out of the boy—that sort of thing?

**GM:** Yeah, and I was cured of feeling this way. And besides I

have a strategy now. I have an apartment here in Toronto where I can settle. I have sort of, with *Brand Upon the Brain!* and *My Winnipeg*, cured myself. And especially with the book. I mean I thought I had cured myself, but the book pushed me to the point where I can't count on the nectars and milk from the past having any flavour anymore. They don't. They're things that have been repeated far too often and things I had to proofread for punctuation far too often and things I had to talk about ten times too often. The moment-by-moment memories of something are things where now I'm going through remembered recitations instead of having the memories themselves. I actually feel a lot healthier now. I was pathologically addicted to the past, it gave me a narcotic thrill. And that was fine, and I was glad to have that, but now I feel it's time to move on.

**JS:** I guess the obvious question now is where to move on to?

**GM:** Well, I'd chosen a project before which is again a nostalgia-based project, and now I'm wondering if I have it in me. I was working on a movie called *Keyholes*, which is an autobiography of a house. Houses are very important both nostalgically

*My Winnipeg*

and in the present. It's not just that you have a living room and a kitchen, there's angles and places so full of latent power for everybody. And even for homeless people, shelter under a cardboard box, that's home. These things mean a lot. And I've read a great deal, with intoxicated pleasure, Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, and it's this French philosophy about the home: sort of defining and then riffing a lot, in a Roland Barthes kind of way, on the idea of home. I thought I could make this philosophy of home go down a lot easier if I sugar-coated it with some kind of melodrama having to do with home, but so much of what home has always meant to me has come from my home that I used to live in. So I do want to make an autobiography about a house, but I don't know if the timing's right, I might be too spent.

**JS:** It reminds me of what you talk about both in *My Winnipeg* and in your conversation with Michael Ondaatje in the book, where you say it's the details in the back of photographs of houses, less so than the people that you end up remembering. You know, it's as if there's some sort of Proustian longing for precisely these details.

**GM:** Yeah, and it's not like I want to be cured of these things. Imagine if Proust had been cured!

**JS:** Another part of the book that is really fascinating is the reprinted E-mail from an ex-girlfriend.
**GM:** I was scared some people would think I wrote it, but it's the real deal.

**JS:** But what's the impulse there? I mean it seems to me that there's sadistic hints of trying to write that E-mail back to her and further impugn her, though you spare mentioning her name obviously...
**GM:** Well sure, she'd sue me.

**JS:** [Laughs] Probably. But there's also a masochistic tendency here, because I mean, she really lets you have it.
**GM:** It's mostly masochistic. I like to think that I'm not that sadistic, well, no more than the average person. I don't wish this person any ill will anymore. And I certainly don't because of this E-mail. I mean, I knew the E-mail was...

**JS:** ...A long time coming?

**GM:** Well yeah. It was an outcry of hurt. I dumped her and hurt her feelings. I don't particularly like the person. But when I first received the e-mail I showed it to my friends, because no one particularly liked her, and even my ex-girlfriend got it, you know so they could weigh in on how right she was or whatever.

**JS:** Maybe add some annotations of their own?

**GM:** Exactly. But when I read it out loud to Alana, because I was trying to get it to be the introduction to the book, she thought that it was amusing but it didn't have anything to do with the book, it didn't set the tone of the book. But when I read it out loud—and it was fun to read aloud, you can throw a lot of mustard on it—I realized that my correspondent was hitting all the points that people might be wondering about me. I mean, here I am, a guy who's so obsessed with a past, at this age even, who still speaks of such childhood things so frequently and so lovingly that you wonder how mature I could possibly be, you know, maybe this guy's really weird, maybe he's not that weird, but could he possible carry on a healthy relationship? Well there's your answer. No. No I can't. And I've never been able to. And her E-mail pretty much hits the points all of my ex-girlfriends have enumerated when we're at the end of the line. I think she, as wildly self-centered as she came off and ludicrously mystical and that stuff, she pretty much hits all the points. [Laughs]

**JS:** Well it's great to even have E-mail, so we can take the time to perfect these sorts of things and make sure we hit all the right points.

**GM:** Oh and I'm sure she worked on that. It was probably her finest piece of writing.

**JS:** Another question that has been nagging me when I watch your past couple of films is what you look for when you're casting a Guy.

**GM:** A Guy Maddin?

**JS:** Yeah.

**GM:** Well, Darcy Fehr, I've always liked him. Even though he's twenty years younger and fifty pounds lighter and has all his hair still, he has the essence of me. He knows how to project my backdoor man-ness, my willingness to do whatever it takes, no matter how cowardly the deed, even if half the time it's just escaping a situation. He's just got something desperate and frightened about him at all times. I like Erik Steffen Maahs in *Brand Upon the Brain!* too. He just looks really good when he's kissing that ghost girl's feet, and looking comfortable doing it. You have to be kind of like a teeming pan of insecurity, and some guys know how to nail it. Whereas little Sullivan Brown was only twelve or thirteen when he played me [in *My Winnipeg*] and he hasn't quite arrived at that yet. He's just a little bit shy.

**JS:** But you can groom him.

**GM:** Yes, he's on that lower portion of the arc that'll take him up to where I am.

**JS:** So you don't have these actors shadow you around or wear old hockey jerseys or anything?

**GM:** [Laughs] It would be nice. I don't know how really famous people deal with it. I mean, I'm a grade-H celebrity and I find the duties required of me very onerous and draining. It would be nice to have someone who could be me. I've tried it with Darcy but he always ends up sleeping with somebody.

**JS:** Making you look too good?

**GM:** Yeah, I get jealous. I mean I think that I could've done that or gotten into that trouble. Or Darcy will sleep with a person and I'll get the STD. [Laughs] It all gets very delirious.

**JS:** Well beyond just working with actors, how collaborative are these recent films? With your earlier films you were more hands-on with things like editing, and you seem now to have relinquished some of that responsibility.

**GM:** Well they're very collaborative, especially *My Winnipeg*. Jody Shapiro was my executive producer on that one and he's also my cinematographer and an experienced documentary filmmaker himself. So when John Gurdebeke, my editor and I, were working on an approach to just try and break up the gridlock, Jody was really helpful. We actually had meetings to design an editing approach. I'd never done that before. I'd always just tried to cut as close to the script as possible and then juggle a few things that might make them better. But here was a case where, like a real documentary, even though I tried to cheat it, to script it like a fiction film, the structure just wasn't working. It was very collaborative.

**JS:** Well you mention in the book that you don't like to use slates when you edit, so I imagine it makes it near impossible to cut the footage together.

**GM:** Slates are for sissies. [Laughs] I really hate slates.

**JS:** Although it's the first thing we see in *My Winnipeg*.

**GM:** Yeah. Well...yeah. I had to endure them. I kept begging, no slates. Don't need them. I guess they help synch up dialogue, but you could just clap your hands. What I really don't like is the thirty seconds of "slate, scene whatever and ever." I don't know how actors, if they've managed to put themselves in a spell, can manage to maintain it through all that slate chat.

**JS:** So then how do you piece the film together? How do you establish a rhythm? Is this just something you leave up to your editors?

**GM:** Well, for *Cowards Bend the Knee* it was pretty simple, and that was the first time I worked with Gurdebeke. I just gave him a script and a bunch of footage. I was originally going to sit in with him, and I did for a while, but what I remembered about editing was that I liked being alone. So once I realized he had a strategy I let him go at it alone. I would supply some temp music that I liked the feeling of for certain chapters. And sometimes it worked and sometimes he would trade chapters, and in one case he tossed out all my music and found another piece and we used that. There he used every shot that I gave him. With *Brand Upon The Brain!*, well, I thought the movie would be a little more frantic...

**JS:** Something that crops up in *Cowards Bend the Knee*, and again in *My Winnipeg*, is this particularly Canadian obsession with hockey.

**GM:** It feels good to have real noir-ish hockey too: a rink where people could disappear into the far shadows.

**JS:** Well one of my favourite bits in *My Winnipeg* is the Black Tuesdays sequence, where you have Terry Sawchuck and all these old players scrimmaging while the Arena collapses around them.

**GM:** Well hockey doesn't get treated well in movie too often. I do have a John Wayne hockey movie, where it looks like he learned to skate like three weeks before, or learning while shooting, what was it called? Oh, *Idol of the Crowds*, a 1937 John Wayne hockey movie. It's pretty good.

**JS:** So back to issues of veracity in *My Winnipeg* for a minute. Were you actually the last guy to take a piss in the Winnipeg Arena?

**GM:** You bet! It was my way of sort of owning the arena tragedy, which really hurt me. I got permission to go in, and I took a pee, and then I stuck around in my idling car to watch the demolition. It was about an hour I had to wait before they clawed out the men's washroom, and then I left.

**JS:** It's a strange scene in the film, because you have onlookers cheering the demolition itself.

**GM:** I think a lot of them were there to say a sad farewell. But when the Arena didn't go all the way down a lot of them started cheering "Go, Jets, Go!" [Laughs] As if the Jets are somehow, by this day of execution, going to be allowed to play again in there. I still can't believe they tore that down, even though it's there on film.

**JS:** Well what else is there now?

**GM:** A vacant lot. There's a new arena downtown but it's awful. I'm actually thinking of breaking my vow of never going in there to go to like a monster truck show or a tractor pull or something.

**JS:** Another thing I like about the scene in *My Winnipeg* where you show the Arena being demolished is how you frame it as if the city is somehow being punished for not being able to support luxury boxes at an NHL arena, which seems to tie into Winnipeg's labour history. And it crops up again with that penultimate image in the film of Citizen Girl, who possesses this very Soviet air about her.

**GM:** Well as a kid I was always proud that Winnipeg was the only city in North America that had elected communist officials. There were some city aldermen and stuff like that who now have bridges named after them. The old communist party headquarters was pretty grim; it's just a little bungalow on Selkirk avenue with a hand-painted sign reading "Communist Party of Canada." I shot in on video for *My Winnipeg* but it never got in. But really, you have the 1919 strike, and these Communist officials and lots of left-wing sympathetic Jewish immigrants.

**JS:** Well Winnipeg seems to be the kind of city that can get away with it too, I mean because no one's eye is really turned to it.

**GM:** Right, it's blue collar, it's out of the way.

**JS:** And the whole labour thing is something that helps distinguish Winnipeg from being just another city in the North American Midwest.

**GM:** Well I went to Regina recently, and everyone in Winnipeg kind of makes fun of Regina. But it was nice, maybe a little bit nicer than Winnipeg. But it's not Communist! I don't believe in mystical stuff, but other people do, and Regina doesn't have a whole bunch of people thinking mystical stuff's going on in it. We Winnipeggers are probably a little more intriguing, and enchanting. And the winters are special too, because they really are so cold and so dry and so sparkly, that if you just put on an extra sweater, and put one on your dog too, you can go out and just be dazzled.

**JS:** Another thing that I've noticed cropping up recently is that *Careful* seems to acquiring this slow build as being a kind of great cult film.

**GM:** Yeah that's kind of nice to see. I rewatched it recently. I don't usually watch my own films, but Zeitgeist was coming out with a new DVD so I watched a new print, and it looked great. The movie isn't quite as great as I remember. And it has its old 1992 walk-out ratio. See with *Brand Upon the Brain!* and *My Winnipeg*, I'd gotten to the point where there was many screenings that nobody walked out of. But *Careful*? We turn back the clock to the 25% walk-out ratio. Nothing will ever match *Archangel*'s 85% walk-out ratio. Although I watched that last year to approve a new print and I watched it with a crowd of people and there were no walk-outs. Although that's probably because they were guilted into staying in their seats.

**JS:** Well I was reading a blog post online about *Careful* as being a cult film, and below the article you had all these readers going back and forth debating whether it qualifies as a cult film or an art film. How would you respond to debates like that, I mean when people call you an "art film director" or a "cult film director"? I mean I wouldn't think that you set out to make art or cult films...

**GM:** I just make 'em. That people are talking about them at all is nice. For example, people used to ask me: "people laugh during your movies, is that intentional?" Well it doesn't matter if it's intentional, it's always welcome. Mostly the answer is yeah, it is intentional in most cases. Though there have been a couple of accidental laughs.

**JS:** Where have you heard the accidental laughs?

**GM:** Well...art house contexts are like churches or something. One in a while people will laugh really loudly at something that isn't that funny. What is it that gets the biggest laugh? There's a moment in *My Winnipeg* that is genuinely not meant to be funny. And it's right at the end when I'm talking about how my mother grew especially attached to the actor playing my brother Cameron, dead these forty years. And people are laughing, but I'm just stating a fact.

**JS:** Well it's quite poignant, I think.

**GM:** Well I was hoping for poignancy. But it consistently gets laughs, so there must be something, maybe my flippant way of speaking. I'm pleased to reap it, though. If nobody laughed I'd be upset.

**John Semley** is a writer and critic living in Toronto. He has written about film for *Exclaim!*, *Cinema Scope*, *Maisonneuve Magazine* and *Cineaste* (forthcoming). He recently completed a Masters of Arts in Cinema Studies at the University of Toronto.

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